

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is the central figure. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved dress with ruffled details and lace on the sleeves. She is looking slightly to her left with a soft expression. She is surrounded by lush white flowers, possibly hydrangeas, which are in focus around her head and shoulders. The background is a soft-focus green and white, suggesting an outdoor garden setting.

FELICIA GREENE

THE UNMARRIAGEABLES: **BOOK FIVE**

**A BEAUTY**  
*for the Brute*

# A Beauty for the Brute

by Felicia Greene

In the very back of the Three Kings, widely known as the most disreputable pub in London, there stood a small wooden table and two wobbling stools. As a fight broke out, three men throwing themselves to the floor in a shouting frenzy of oaths, curses and breaking glass, Susan Blake took a sip of water with a hand that trembled only slightly.

This bar was filthier, darker and more objectively dangerous than anywhere she'd visited before. It was at the very end of a rat and bottle-strewn alley, the beer looked like water from a polluted lake and the staff, if they could indeed be called staff and not enforcers, had more broken noses and cauliflower ears than any usual collection of workers in a public house. But even if The Three Kings had been a bandit outpost in the woods, complete with human body parts roasting on an open fire, Susan would have come here just as willingly as she had tonight.

She finally felt safe. Safer than she had in years. And all of it was

down to the man in front of her, who looked more menacing than all of the pub staff put together.

‘Jack.’ She paused. She didn’t know how to address someone who was almost two metres tall and had shoulders like a boxer. Not that she’d ever met a boxer, but they had to look like this man. Perhaps not with quite so many tattoos—had he been a sailor before choosing to do this strange work? ‘Do you have a surname?’

Jack’s voice was a low, rough growl. ‘None that you need to know about.’

‘But you know mine.’

‘I need to know it for the job.’ Jack paused as he took a swig of beer, draining half the glass in one gulp. ‘You don’t need to know mine.’

True. She didn’t need to know his name. She already knew enough about him, thanks to the careful probing of maids, washerwoman, all in snatched moments during errands when no-one would quite remember who she was or what she’d asked. Overhearing conversations in places where she shouldn’t have been, listening to words that she wasn’t allowed to listen to, all in the few precious seconds of unobserved time that she had to herself each day before she was forced to go home.

She’d been late more than once. She’d been beaten more than once; beaten so hard that she hadn’t been able to walk for three days afterwards, but it had been worth it. Thanks to her patient, painstaking work, to the information she’d gathered and the risks, however great, she’d taken, she was finally sitting in front of someone who could help her.

‘Do you have the money?’

‘Not now.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I wasn’t going to bring my only way of escaping into a place like this.’ It was difficult to speak. She was normally so quiet, making every effort to be invisible, but this situation required bravery. The intensity of Jack’s gaze didn’t help; his dark brown eyes stared at her as if she was the only person in the world. ‘I’m already a target.’

‘Not now. Not with me.’

‘But you won’t come home with me.’ Imagining this man in the stultifying confines of her father’s house was astonishing. ‘And people could follow me home.’

Jack bristled as if she’d insulted him. Biting her lip for a moment, wondering why she was so aware of every single expression the man made, Susan went on.

‘I’ll bring the money tomorrow. All of it.’

‘Good. Are you packed?’

‘As much as I can be. I have to do most of it at night, in silence. But I’ve already packed most of the important things.’

Jack nodded. ‘Does anyone know?’

‘No-one. My friends must know that I’m planning something, but they haven’t asked me exactly what.’

‘Why?’

‘Because they love me too much to ask.’

It was true. Susan had seen the concern on Arabella, Bertha, Grace and Rose’s faces as time wore on and her bruises had grown more visible. They had offered her places in their homes more than once, given her longer hugs than normal, occasionally teetered on asking outright if home was becoming unsupportable, unbearable—but she had always, always, kept silent.

If she was going to leave behind her father’s wrath, his growing violence, she would do so on her own terms. She wouldn’t seek the charity of friends. Instead, she had spent over a year stealing money from her father’s purse as he lay drunk and snoring in his bed, always taking fewer coins than she wanted to in order to avoid suspicion.

Now, she had enough. Enough to have paid for an introduction to Jack-without-a-surname. Jack, who was famous—or infamous, given on who you spoke to—for making people disappear if they needed to disappear.

‘You’re not my usual sort of client.’

‘I’m sure I’m not. But I have the money and I wish to pay you.’ The man was more intimidating than she’d expected. He didn’t look like the pale, shadowy criminal of popular imagination, able to slink into corners and hide there; this enormous man couldn’t hide anywhere. His skin was weathered by the sun, intriguing blue lines of ink covering his neck and shoulders making lines that Susan realised, to her surprise, that she wanted to interpret. ‘If you have any objections to—’

‘I don’t have objections to money.’ Jack leaned forward. ‘And you need to have no objection to the plan.’

‘I don’t know the plan.’

‘Exactly. You can’t object to not knowing about it, and you can’t object once it starts happening either.’

‘I’m not the objecting type.’ She’d spoken more words over the course of this single conversation than she had in weeks. Silence was safe; silence meant people considered one stupid, underestimating instead of being appropriately watchful. ‘At least, I don’t think I am.’

‘And no second thoughts.’ Jack paused. His expression was a strange mixture of caution and hostility, his dark eyes a mysterious world that Susan couldn’t help but want to penetrate. ‘I mean it.’

‘I—’

Once you've disappeared, before you make your plans to go wherever you wish to end up, your life will be very different. No more fine things, no airs and graces—no servants. At most a few close friends will know where you are, and only if they can be sworn to secrecy. You'll be removed from whatever high circles you've been mixing in, and—'

'My father broke my shoulder six months ago. He threw me to the floor and stamped on me, as if I was a piece of furniture that was no longer useful to him.' Saying the words hurt almost as viciously as the act had. 'That's the largest part of me he broke. There have been assorted fingers and toes, once a rib—he went too far with the rib and knew it, I couldn't present at dances for a month and people began to talk—'

'What?'

He looked shocked. Susan paused; she didn't think a man like Jack was capable of looking shocked. The litany of her father's violence was so familiar to her now, as habitual as a prayer: a reason to keep going with her plans whatever happened. 'Do I need to say more?'

'No.' Jack shook his head. His dark eyes darted over her body as if looking for cuts, wounds. Being stared at with such attention was almost unnerving; she was never looked at in such a caring way, least of all by gentlemen. 'You don't.'

Her reasons for leaving were valid, then. Susan had always privately believed it, but it was good to have her suspicions confirmed. Fathers were meant to correct their daughters, but they weren't meant to torture them—and they certainly weren't meant to gain an aggressive pleasure from doing so. No matter how many people excoriated her in public after her disappearance, they would speak about her very differently in private.

'Do you think people will suspect that he has murdered me?' The thought was so sudden and shocking that it slipped past her lips without thinking. 'My father?'

'Perhaps.'

'My goodness.'

'It'll be less than what he deserves.'

'Mm.' Jack's quiet tone of voice brooked no argument. Susan nodded, wondering if being supported always felt quite this lovely. As if she'd been placed under a glass jar, cut off from her worries and concerns. 'I suppose.'

She had never considered retribution. All of her strength went towards survival, and revenge never entered into that. She would find enough satisfaction from simply disappearing off of the face of the earth, winking out like the light of a candle in her father's house and reappearing somewhere else. Somewhere safe.

Jack didn't seem to agree. Even though he was wordless, his face showed with complete eloquence exactly what he thought Susan's father deserved. His furrowed brow, his broad cheekbones complete with a thin white scar running down to the corner of his thin, purposeful mouth, all spoke of bad people receiving punishments that the universe hadn't seen fit to give any other way.

But she was romanticising him. Why was she doing that? Perhaps because Jack was simply so unlike anyone else she had ever seen, perhaps because there was a strange, electric tug at the base of her stomach whenever he looked at her, whenever he spoke. As if every part of her wished to pay deep, close attention to him. Or perhaps, much more likely, it was because he was her only way of disappearing.

He knew the places to hide, the people to bribe. He was part of a dark world she'd never entered; even in her private hell at home, she'd never felt the precariousness of poverty. But despite their different universes, Jack was to be her hero.

She wouldn't tell him that. He didn't look as if he'd take it as a compliment. But something in Susan, something that had survived every blow her father had ever thrown at her, glowed.

'I'll be by the servants' entrance at dawn. First light.'

'Yes.'

'Be as quick as you can in the morning. Don't stop to look, to speak. Wear a bonnet that covers your hair from the house to the carriage, then take it off once we're inside.'

'Why?'

'I told you not to question.'

'Oh—yes.' She didn't want to displease him. Still, at least she wasn't scared to displease him—not like her father. Jack looked far stronger than him, but was also clearly capable of exerting immense control over himself. How odd to feel safe with someone who seemed so dangerous. 'Forgive me.'

'No. I...' Jack looked even grumpier than before. 'It's because of your hair.'

'My hair?'

'It'll be noticeable. When we're far away from the house, you can show it.'

'It isn't that noticeable.'

'Trust me. It is.'

Was that... a compliment? Susan was so unused to receiving them that she didn't know how to react. Eventually she settled on an awkward nod; a deepening of Jack's frown made her sure that she'd been mistaken. 'I'll wear a bonnet.'

'Good. I'll see you tomorrow morning.'

‘Yes.’ Was it already over? She’d spent so long planning this meeting, thinking about it, that it almost didn’t make sense for the time to have gone by so fast. Susan rose from her chair, smoothing down her skirts as Jack rose too. He towered over her; Susan prided herself on not being short, at least a head above other women of twenty, but next to this man she was dwarfed. ‘Tomorrow morning.’

‘Make sure your plans are settled tonight.’

‘I will... thank you.’

Jack’s mouth twisted. All at once he looked both grim and sad. ‘Don’t thank me yet.’

There was nothing she could reasonably say to that. She couldn’t keep standing here and looking at him either, even if he was fascinating. With another nod, turning around quickly before she could think better of it, Susan pulled her shawl over her shoulders and walked away.

The night was clearer than it had been when she’d walked into the pub. Perhaps the cold had cleared away the thick, choking mist, replacing it with crisp air and starlight. Susan walked through the dark streets with her head bowed, her step quickening at every shadow.

She slipped back into the house just as her father fell asleep. She had timed her excursion perfectly; if she left too early her father would leave the house and drag her back there, sometimes physically, more often than not with cruel words that would leave her too ashamed to remain outside. If she left too late, she would return when her father woke up with raging pain in his head and an urge to pick up his stick and set about her. Closing her eyes for a brief moment, praying that he was truly as deep in slumber as he usually was at this hour of the evening, Susan tiptoed through the corridor and made her way up the stairs.

A light was burning under the door in her mother’s room. Susan averted her face, swallowing, and didn’t pause until she reached her own bedroom. She closed the door, leaned against it, and sighed.

She tried not to think about her mother. She’d pleaded with her for so long, often in tears—begged her to leave, to run away to the Continent, to take her with her. But after years of excuses, years of her mother’s tears and shrinking away and endless protestations that Father was a good man, really, he was simply taken to anger and overburdened with work and *really, Susan, do you have to be so wilful*—she had fallen into silence, finally aware that the person who was meant to love her most in the world wasn’t going to help her.

Fine. If that was the way things were to be, then fine. Her mother could sit in her room alone, rationalising all of her choices, while she

would sit in her room and make a new future. Susan pushed a chair in front of the door, sat on her bed, and pulled a small piece of paper covered with densely-written notes out from beneath her mattress.

She had done everything. She had slowly, carefully squirrelled away useful clothes and things into an old leather pack that her father never used anymore, hidden in the back of the stables beneath a heap of hay, and managed to do the same with the nuts and dried fruits left over from the Simnel cake so many months ago. They would sustain her if more nourishing food was lacking—but that was a doubtful outcome, given there was Jack.

Jack. She was putting her life into his hands. Susan thought of him for a moment, conjuring him up, then let the thought drift away. To think of him was compelling, dreadfully compelling—but the most important item on her list hadn't been completed. Not yet.

Moving soundlessly across the room, she went to her desk. Behind the desk stood the white-plastered wall; Susan rested her hand against the plaster, finding the near-invisible outlines of what lay within.

Her father didn't know about this secret niche in the wall. If he had known about it, he would have already lorded it over her; let her hide her secrets in it for a month and then presented all of them to her at the table over Sunday lunch. But he didn't know about it—perhaps her grandfather had deliberately hid it from him, knowing what a terrible person his son would turn out to be—and so it acted as a hiding place for her few, treasured possessions.

She brought them out into the candlelight, her father's snores giving her the confidence to go on. The newspaper article that had brought her and her friends such unexpected and unwelcome fame, where they had rejected the idea of ever being married. A sheaf of letters from all of them, from Arabella, Bertha, Grace and Rose—the Unmarriageables, as they called themselves and one another, even though all of them except her had married since.

Susan knew none of them really understood why she had insisted on signing her name beneath that letter. All of her friends knew her father's excesses; everyone in the ton did, whispering about it behind her hands. She had said something about her talents, her desire for a solitary life lived in simplicity—she had even mentioned a house by the sea and a piano, even though she'd never been taken to visit said house and had long since given up playing. Her friends didn't need to know that her father had beaten that particular joy out of her. All they knew was the most important thing; that she didn't intend to go from a life under her father's thumb to a new life under the thumb of her husband. The type of man that her father would consider a good suitor for her was something Susan loathed to think about.

More letters. A small bunch of dried flowers; blooms she'd picked



from Arabella's tiny courtyard garden on the day the article had been published. Her last little taste of freedom, of joy, before her father had come to find her.

Behind all of these things, something sat at the back of the niche.

Susan drew out the leather pouch. The sound of clinking coins was louder than she'd expected; Susan covered the top of the pouch with one hand, her glance darting to the door.

No curious footsteps from her mother. No angry ones from her father. Susan waited, eventually withdrawing her hand and looking inside the pouch.

So many coins. So many notes. So many years of careful, patient theft; every time her father grew drunk enough to bet, to go to his club and waste vast amounts of the housekeeping money on piquet or even more foolish games. He'd wake with no recollection of what he'd done after he'd thrown the first handful of coins on the gaming table, and had no friends close enough to tell him how much he'd lost or do anything but gloat over his conduct. All Susan had to do was tiptoe into whatever room he'd finally staggered home and slept in, gently take his purse from his pocket and take whatever notes and coins she found there.

Sometimes it had been a handful of coins, almost not worth the theft at all. Sometimes it had been an enormous sheaf of notes; occasionally, just occasionally, her father had won. She had taken whatever she found, making sure to occasionally miss a week so her father wouldn't begin to suspect a pattern, and had eventually built up a considerable store of wealth.

Well. Perhaps wealth was a strong word. *Enough* was a better one: enough wealth to take her away from his cruel house, and the cruel man who ran it. Enough to pay the hulking, dark-eyed Jack as much as he wanted to spirit her away from all this, to snap his fingers and place her in a better, brighter life.

Jack. The most unlikely name—not to mention appearance—for a hero. But something compelled her to imagine him for a long, long time, sitting at her desk with the full coin pouch in her hands, remembering everything she could about the tall, massive man with scars on his hands and an unexpectedly gentle tone of voice when surprised. Only when one of the candles next to her guttered down to nothing, the flame winking out, did she come to her senses with a blink.

This was no way to spend her last night at her childhood home. She had to barricade the door with a chair in case her father woke up with a desire for violence, shutter her windows against the cold night air, and wait.

Wait until dawn. Wait until Jack's carriage drew up outside the

servant's entrance, ready to take her away.

It was a cold, grey morning with spitting rain, along with a harsh wind that blew said raindrops onto Jack's face, neck and worn shirt as he helped Susan into the carriage. He made sure she was sheltered from the rain, glared at the coachman with such clear venom that the man shook in his boots, and hunched his shoulders as he ducked into the carriage himself.

Normally he drove the carriage himself when he was taking people away from their houses. He was a damned good gig-driver—good enough to out-drive Bow Street, along with any thief-taker who fancied their chances—and the person inside usually finished the journey in the same condition in which they started it. But this was far too nice an area for the likes of him to be seen driving around the streets; people would start asking questions, people with connections, and that wasn't going to help his newest client get away.

He shut the carriage door with a bang. Susan flinched; Jack fumbled for an apology, eventually settling for a moody silence as he settled down next to her.

He couldn't sit opposite her. If he did that he'd want to look at her, talk to her, even though she was clearly desperate for sleep. Best that he sit here, crammed as tightly as he could into the corner of the carriage—a difficult feat, given his size—and not say a single word.

Susan's money crinkled softly in the pocket of his much-darned waistcoat. Jack gritted his teeth, ignoring it. She'd handed it to him before even greeting him, as if she was ashamed of having money in her hands—and Jack, despite never having felt the least bit of shame about money, had shoved it into his waistcoat without even counting it.

He was used to dealing with the scum of the earth. Men with no morals and less control over their worst impulses, who had done something unforgivable and intended to spend their last penny on avoiding the punishment they so richly deserved. He was trying to avoid those clients more and more, his soul beginning to writhe at the thought of helping another evil man walk free... but they paid well, well enough to allow him to give his parents, brothers and sisters a better life than they had ever expected, and so when another thug with money came along the money usually won.

And then came Susan Blake. An angel in the muck; he shouldn't think of her that way, shouldn't think about thinking about it, but when he'd seen her cloud of white-blonde hair in the darkness of the pub he couldn't avoid the comparison. Quiet, delicate Susan Blake, with her thin wrists and large eyes and faded bruises on her shoulders: bruises that made him wince internally despite the horrors he'd seen

over the course of his life.

Her father had done that to her. What type of man could hurt something so precious—and like it so much that he kept doing it, kept hurting?

The kind of men that came to him for help, of course. Jack glanced at Susan in the carriage, her arms tightly folded and her head slightly bowed, and bit his lip as a wave of guilt flooded him.

Perhaps this woman had come to him as a form of retribution. A kind of punishment for what he'd done before this: make the world easier for the kind of men who took pleasure in hurting women like her. Or perhaps because she looked and sounded so very like an angel, right down to the faint but potent scent of flowers that clung to her, she represented salvation.

He could save her. Do his job as he'd done for all of the terrible people who'd come his way before, but do it to the absolute utmost for Susan Blake. If she wanted to disappear—disappear completely without dying—then he, like a large, scarred djinn from a lamp, would make that happen. No matter how many people he had to hurt to do it.

Susan's head was nodding against her chest. Jack looked at her for longer than before, studying her with more attention than was entirely wise. Her eyes were closed, the small signs of weariness in her face smoothed out into something approaching contentment.

How long had it been since she'd been able to sleep in peace? Years, if her father was as brutal as he was imagining. Jack reached for his oilcloth, wrapped it into a rough bundle, and placed it with utmost gentleness at the side of Susan's head.

There. He hadn't woken her up, and he'd made her slightly more comfortable. Not that this was his job, or anything approaching it, and—and oh, Christ, he couldn't start going down this road. Not if he wanted any peace at all.

Best he think of other things. Like the trustworthiness of the driver; he'd come recommended, which was good, but recommended by the type of men he worked alongside, which could be bad. One of them could be angling for a place at the top of the heap. Still, he'd paid the man well—and he knew where the man lived, which was more useful. And the place where they'd sleep tonight was a hole, a wretched place, but their presence there would never go beyond the walls of the rotting building.

But it really was horrible. The kind of place where his usual clients felt at peace—but what about Susan? It was clear from her air of refinement that she'd never been anywhere rougher than the pub where they'd met yesterday. She'd caused a sensation; men had stared at her as she'd left, and Jack had been forced to punch several of them

into submission. And follow her home, keeping to the shadows, to make sure she walked through the front door unharmed.

Not that he could blame the men who had stared. Not really. In their world, their dark, dirt-drenched world, Susan was a ray of light.

‘Where are we going?’

*Bloody hell.* She’d looked almost completely asleep. ‘Never you mind.’

‘I do mind. I want to know where I’m going.’

‘You paid to disappear. You didn’t pay for a teacher.’

‘For the amount I paid, I rather think I paid for both.’

Jack snorted. ‘Knowing the way won’t help you get there any faster.’

‘No, but it’ll help me keep calm.’

‘You looked calm enough when you were nodding off a moment ago.’

‘But now I’m awake, and I don’t know where we’re going.’ The woman had a remarkably cool stare. ‘And if you don’t tell me where we’re going, I’m going to get nervous.’

Jack sat in silence, his throat tight. Eventually, with a harsh sigh, he leaned forward. ‘We’re heading out of London.’

‘We are?’

‘Just in case someone saw you getting into the carriage with me. Then, once we reach the outskirts of the city, we’re going to make a ring and come back into the heart of it again.’

‘Why?’

‘Because a lot of people could see us, and if they do see us, they’re all going to assume that we’re heading out of London to different places in England. To the sea, to the countryside. Then, once we’ve shown this carriage in a dozen different places, we’re going to go into a stables I’m well-acquainted with and change carriages.’

‘I see.’

‘To avoid detection.’

‘I understood that part.’

‘You wanted to be taught, so I’m teaching you.’ If he pretended he was annoyed, even to himself, he could ignore just how much he was enjoying speaking to her. Just as he had enjoyed speaking to her at the pub—but Christ, he couldn’t enjoy this. Enjoy her. ‘And then we’ll reach where you’re sleeping for the night.’

‘And where’s that?’

‘I can’t tell you.’

‘But you can tell me everything else.’

‘If we’re caught, if your father sends the Runners after us or even worse people, you need to be a plausible victim.’

‘Plausible what? I—’

‘If you don’t know the address of where we were going, no matter how fiercely they interrogate you, no-one would ever be able to say that you played a part in the plan. Everyone would think I’d kidnapped you.’

‘But—but you aren’t kidnapping me. You’d be punished for something that you haven’t done.’

‘You paid me, didn’t you? This is what you pay for.’ How she was so innocent about the world, he really didn’t know. ‘Even if I moulder in a cell for a few years, you’ve paid me enough to keep food on the table for my family.’

‘Your family. You have children.’

‘No! No.’ Quite why he needed to reassure her so strenuously, he didn’t know. ‘My brothers and sisters.’

‘Oh.’ Susan slowly nodded. ‘I see.’

Why had she needed to ascertain the details of his personal life? No reason Jack could immediately name. He dug his hands deeper into the pocket of his greatcoat, scowling. ‘Is that enough knowledge to be going on with?’

‘Yes.’

The conversation appeared to be over. Susan didn’t look irritated, or bursting with more questions—if anything she looked slightly ashamed. Fighting his instincts to remain in grumpy silence for the rest of the day, Jack swallowed. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘No more questions?’

‘None.’ Susan took a deep breath. ‘I’m not used to this.’

‘To what? Disappearing?’

‘No. Talking.’

Now that was odd enough to pay more attention to. ‘What do you mean, you’re not used to talking?’

‘Exactly that. I rarely speak, even among friends.’ Susan looked out of the window for a moment, the sunlight dancing over her face in a way that Jack couldn’t help but find utterly arresting. ‘But given that this situation is so novel, and requires my full participation... well, I assumed I had to speak up. And I didn’t wish to make you uncomfortable with my silence.’

Such consideration was something Jack had never experienced in the course of his job. The people he normally transported treated him as a tool, an equivalent of a horse or a bag of money; someone who would do the job, not ask questions, and melt away when the work was done. Susan, with all the refinement of a lady in circles Jack couldn’t dare to dream about, had taken his comfort into consideration.

He felt a stirring somewhere in the back of his mind. Something

intimately connected to his body, the way he felt when he looked at her. Something animal that he had to keep restrained at all costs; if she was thinking of his comfort, he had to think of hers. 'You don't have to worry about how I feel.'

'But I do. Of course I do.'

'It's quite all right to keep silent.' As the words left his lips he saw how impolite they had to sound. 'If you want to keep talking—'

'I don't. I now know what I needed to know.' Susan smiled; the carriage grew one or two degrees brighter. 'Thank you.'

Thanks as well. Another truly rare thing. Jack awkwardly nodded, not quite knowing what to do with himself, and pushed himself even more firmly into the corner of the carriage.

The silence, apart from one or two soft-spoken interruptions to ask where they were now or what the name of the stables was, lasted until the evening. The plan worked like clockwork—as it should, given how many times Jack had done it. They made a wide, sweeping circle around the city, allowing Susan's blonde hair to flash out of the window on any number of occasions to confuse anyone who happened to be watching, and changed carriages at his dingy little stable of choice while Susan sat primly on a small chair, watching all of the activity with the guardedly pleasant face of someone who didn't really know what was going on, but was determined to show that she didn't much care either way. Then back into the city in the new carriage—an even smaller one, where it was even more difficult to keep his knee from brushing against Susan as the vehicle rocked and swayed.

The day slowly lengthened into afternoon, then evening. Jack looked out of the window as the carriage approached its final destination; he'd spent too long looking at Susan, sneaking glances at her out of the corners of his eye, and would need to keep his mind on the job at hand if he didn't want to lose every ounce of respect for himself.

The carriage moved down the narrowing streets. Well-dressed ladies and gentlemen taking in the air soon became men drinking under gas-lamps, women of easy virtue leaning casually against walls with the dull glaze of gin in their eyes. Cats yowled from the top of walls, caught by packs of barking, scarred dogs that roamed freely over the road as if they owned this particularly insalubrious part of London.

Jack glanced back at Susan. She was staring out of her window as if she'd been transported to the moon, her eyes wide, but with no sign of panic on her face.

Oh, God. What had he been thinking, bringing her here? He should have bribed some nurses to keep her at the hospital—say she was a burns victim and keep her swaddled in bandages, hidden behind

a sheet. Something that would give her a soft, sweet-smelling environment to enjoy for a little while, rather than this rat-filled cesspit. He looked gingerly at Susan, half-expecting her to faint dead away as they passed a man swaying on his bare feet, gin bottle in hand. 'It's not a place for swells.'

To his shock, Susan didn't look frightened in the slightest. At first Jack wondered whether it was sheer naivete, an inability to see the sadness and decay on display, but then he grew slowly sure that it was something else entirely.

She wasn't scared of anything here. He had removed her from the only thing that frightened her, and now the world was a different place. She was like a bloodied soldier, in ruins from the wars, watching a pub fight—there was that same flat, slightly disquieting calm.

What secrets lay behind those eyes? Those eyes like lanterns, illuminating everything her gaze touched? Jack stared at Susan, lost in her stillness, before collecting himself with a barely audible growl. 'We'll stop here.'

'I see.'

'Wait for me to get out and look around. I'll nod when it's safe.'

Susan nodded in response. Jack knocked on the roof of the carriage; it came to a halt, the horses whinnying as he opened the door.

He splashed heavily into unidentifiable muck as he disembarked. He brushed down his coat with a single, disdainful gesture, staring hard at the men who had begun to surround him until they all had second thoughts.

He held out his hand. He restrained a shiver as Susan took it, her bare fingers as soft as a whisper as she got out of the carriage. She turned, looking up at the building they'd stopped outside of.

There was no sign. It didn't need one; everyone knew that this part of Limehouse had the best opium, and this dilapidated structure was the only place to find the best examples of the drug in large quantities.

'It looks safe. In a way.' Susan looked at him. 'Safe for me, at least.'

'It will be.'

'I know.' Susan paused. 'I doubt anyone will try to get past you.'

Jack restrained a burst of laughter. He rarely laughed—but then, he rarely had incentive to do so. 'They won't.'

'I'm... I'm very tired. Exhausted, in fact.'

'Yes. You must be.' He wasn't used to talking to his clients. They were usually men of very few words, either because they knew too much or couldn't pronounce anything more than a grunt, or they were

women and children so paralysed by fear that it was a job to get them in and out of the carriage, let alone talk to them. Now he wasn't only talking, he was being... kind. 'We'll get you inside.'

'Jack?'

'Yes?'

'Thank you.'

'Don't thank me yet.' Best to cut this conversation off before he revealed something. Before he accepted her thanks, smiled at her, lingered for a little too long when he looked at her. 'Not until we're out of the city.'

'And when will we be out of the city?'

'Tomorrow morning. First light.'

'I see.' Susan paused. Then I will save my thanks for then.'

The thought of her saving her gratitude, storing it like a parcel somewhere, made Jack want to laugh again. As he forced himself to keep a straight face, he realised with a jolt that he still had hold of her hand.

*Fuck.* He let go of her immediately. Susan looked down; it was impossible to see her expression, see how he'd affected her. Jack dug his hands into his pockets before he could sink even deeper into silliness. 'Come on. Inside.'

Susan began to walk. Her skirts brushed against the puddles and muck of the street. Jack stared at her sodden hem, watching the mud slowly creep into the fine white cotton, and bit back a sigh.

He'd keep her as untouched as possible by all this. He'd have her gown washed—how they bloody hell he was going to do it he didn't know, but he would. And before Susan so much as stepped foot into whatever room his associates had set aside for her, he would make sure it was clean, warm, and preferably smelling of flowers.

A nightgown. A thin cotton nightgown, clearly much-washed and much-darned, shoved into her hands by Jack with a look so forbidding that Susan didn't dare to speak so much as a word. Just as she had summoned up enough courage for a questioning look, a slight frown, he had shut the door in her face.

Well. At least she had something to wear. She had many nightgowns packed with her, but she didn't wish to insult Jack by asking for them now that he'd gone to the evident trouble of procuring one for her. Moving away from the door, drawing the thin curtain across the large window, Susan changed for bed.

She had never been in an opium den before. She and the Unmarriageables had always been unconventional in their pursuits, but never quite this unconventional. The most she'd heard of the drug, short of snatches in newspapers that she wasn't meant to be reading,



was when her father chose to rail against the people who took it as worthless, lazy people who had no business being alive and who were inevitably involved in all sorts of gruesome crimes, all of which he took great relish in recounting over the breakfast table.

There hadn't been any gruesome crimes since she'd arrived. None in plain view, anyway; there was a certain amount of whispering in doorways, but that tended to stop when Jack walked by. How nice it had to be to make people stop talking with one's mere presence; whenever she walked through a ballroom, or down a street, a certain amount of sly gossip managed to follow her. Here, through the power of Jack's mere presence, no-one had been anything but polite.

There were some sad-eyed men in corners, clearly under the influence of the smoke drifting out of several clay pipes, but they didn't look capable of bothering anyone. Jack had looked at them with pity as he'd ushered her through the ground floor, but his hand had rested on her shoulders in order to make her feel safe all the same.

She'd even eaten. A small plate of tongue with boiled vegetables in an antechamber while Jack had stood outside, talking in low tones with a small elderly woman who appeared to be in charge of the place. And now she was here, in this surprisingly large room at the very top of the winding, crumbling house, a large bay window showing the stars.

Even the sound of the mice in the walls was almost comforting. Susan listened to them, imagining the small but useful lives they all led within the nooks and crannies of this mysterious place, and sat down gingerly on the mattress.

It smelled clean. Nothing else in this rookery had an odour anything close to fresh, but the mattress smelled like fresh air and lavender water. Jack had to have gone through this place from top to bottom, menacing everyone within reach, all to allow her a pleasant place to rest her head. He didn't know that she would have taken the filthiest mattress in the world, one full of rats and stained with blood, if it meant she was no longer in her bed at home.

And now the man was standing outside, willing to stay awake all night in order to protect her. Susan bit her lip, overcome by a new, precious feeling of safety. Safety twinned with excitement—a collection of sentiments she'd almost never held, certainly not together. But when it came to Jack, tall and tattooed and brutishly large, it was impossible to feel anything but protected.

And he was gentle, too. Gentle enough to nudge a teacup across a table to her, to pick up her bonnet ribbon. His hands were so rough, but so delicate at the same time... but she couldn't lie here and think about Jack's hands. Think about them stroking her hair, her face.

Caressing more than her face.

She hadn't felt desire for a long, long time. Living in her father's house had been a matter of survival; there was no time for more complex, passionate feelings when everything was focused on surviving from moment to moment. She still remembered the first stirrings she'd felt lying in bed as an adolescent: the way a slow fire had burned in her, at the meeting of her thighs, when she thought about certain gentlemen she had danced with.

That fire was back. No small spark either: something vast. Mixed with the headiness of freedom, of having distance, doors and locks between her and the home she hated beyond all reason, her body had awoken with seemingly no provocation.

Well. One provocation. Susan stared at the wood of the door, wondering if Jack's hands were against it. Wondering if he was thinking about her... thinking about her as something more than a wounded bird in need of rescue.

She was too tired to pursue this line of thought. Exhausted, in fact: it was as if her body had decided to release years of tension at once. All of it was bleeding into the clean, sweet-smelling mattress, the wool blanket atop her giving off a scent of similar freshness, leaving her soft and warm and unable to do anything other than blink, breathe, sigh.

She could sleep now. Sleep without worrying about how early she would have to wake up, how quickly she would have to dress in order to avoid her father's wrath. Sleep in the full and certain knowledge that even if her father came here, even if he brought an entire army with him, Jack would give him a welcome to reckon with.

Four hours, and deep silence behind the door. The best that Jack could hope for, but the night wasn't over yet. He stiffened his shoulders, glaring hard at a staggering opium-user who staggered up the stairs in clear search of a full pipe and a place to sleep, until the corridor was empty once again. Apart from a large rat, who trotted merrily from one room to another as if he were a lady playing social calls.

Had he checked the room thoroughly enough for rats? There were a few mice, small things that he hadn't the heart to kill, but the girl didn't seem as if she'd be bothered by the occasional small creature. She was a small enough creature herself, thin as a reed, but the steel in her made Jack quiver.

He'd made it nice enough. At least, he thought so. He didn't know what women liked—at least, not women of quality like Susan—but he'd shouted and harangued the people who worked here until they'd made a space that looked and smelled clean. He'd brought blankets himself, from the small, spare set of rooms he kept in Hallowmere

Street on the rare occasions when he could sleep instead of work, because every cloth in this godforsaken hell-hole either had holes in it or stank. Now Susan had a safe, clean space to lay her head, and a way to keep warm during the night.

But he shouldn't think about her holding his blanket. Resting her body beneath it, hugging it tight. Susan Blake, with her soft voice and bruises and astonishing inner strength, was already making him think far too many thoughts. Thoughts he had no business thinking, given that he had an envelope full of her money in his pocket. Thoughts, and feelings, and... and wants.

But he wasn't paid to want. He definitely wasn't paid to want Susan. Protect her, keep her safe, care for her as much as he could. But not want her.

A soft rustle of blankets came from Susan's room. Jack pressed his ear to the wood, alert for footsteps or cries of alarm, but there was nothing but a quiet sigh.

She had turned in her sleep. Made herself more comfortable. Started dreaming, perhaps—and she would be dreaming of a duke, some clean-handed gentleman with money and land and a hundred rooms for her to hide in, rather than a hulk of a brute with nothing but his wits and strength to live on. People like him weren't worth dreaming about.

Another rustle came. More decided this time—had she woken up? Did she need something? Jack put his ear to the wood again, listening with complete attention. More rustles, then a soft thud as if she'd kicked away the blankets, then... then something low, a whimper.

He couldn't barge in and interrupt her sleep based on nothing more than instinct. That would be stupid, not to mention exposing a part of himself that he would rather keep hidden. Something anxious, caring; something that had pricked up its ears as soon as he'd come face to face with Susan, whispering at the back of his mind that this woman needed a different sort of protection.

He couldn't listen to that impulse. It would only lead him into trouble. But something was happening on the other side of that door, something that didn't sound joyful, and it had him on such high alert that he could hear his heart beating rapidly in his chest.

*Fucking hell.* Another whimper, louder this time: a clear sound of distress. Ignoring his better self, Jack barged through the door and stood over Susan's mattress.

The sound of the door closing behind him barely intruded as he stared down at Susan. She was clearly in the grip of some powerful nightmare; her pale forehead was soaked with sweat, her eyes darting rapidly beneath her closed lids. Jack looked on helplessly as she twisted on the mattress, kicking away the blanket as she whimpered

in fear at whatever she was seeing.

This went beyond the bounds of their agreement. He was meant to protect her from real danger, things in the external world that meant her harm. But at the same time, some deep part of him knew that with Susan—with the woman lying in front of him, gripping the blankets as if she were terrified—he would keep her from any harm, real or imagined, whether it was as large as a vengeful family or as small as a nightmare.

But then, this was no small nightmare. She looked as if she were in the grip of something truly horrifying. Jack knelt down, clenching his hands into fists in an effort not to touch her, as Susan murmured something into her pillow.

‘I won’t say I’m sorry.’ The words were slurred by sleep, but their defiance touched Jack’s heart. ‘I won’t. You won’t make me.’

There was that strength again. Even in the midst of something that frightened her to her core, the woman was defiant to the last. Jack bit his lip, a strange rush of pleasurable tenderness filling him with guilty excitement, before a fearful cry from Susan drained it all away.

‘Don’t touch me.’ Now she writhed as if boiling water was scalding her. She kicked away the blankets; Jack averted his eyes as her body was revealed to him, even though the shape of her was firmly impressed on his mind from the very first moment. ‘Don’t—please, please don’t—’

Oh, fuck it. He couldn’t simply stand by and watch when she was in this much distress. Jack leaned over her, trying to pick the correct tone of voice to use. ‘Wake up, Miss Blake.’

‘Don’t touch me—I won’t—’

‘Miss Blake. Wake up. It’s a bad dream.’

‘Help! Mother, why won’t you help?’

‘Susan.’ The Christian name slipped out without warning. She was in too much distress for Jack to pay any attention to niceties; he cupped her face, hoping the roughness of his fingers would startle her awake even if his voice didn’t. ‘Susan, wake up.’

‘Help me!’

‘Wake up!’

Susan’s eyes flew open. For a moment Jack was caught in her stare, in a wave of soft blue that crashed about him like an ocean. He knew he should remove his hand from her face, lean away from her, but it felt impossible to move so much as a finger.

‘It’s all right.’ How could he be comforting? He’d never comforted anyone in his life. ‘I’m here. It’s all right.’

Susan gasped. The sound was almost more shocking than the words she’d said while sleeping; it took all the air from the room, laced everything with panic. Just as Jack was about to pull his hand

away, to make an apology, she abruptly closed her mouth again and blinked. She turned her head ever-so-slightly, her eyelashes brushing against Jack's thumb.

Before Jack could let go of her, she threw her arms around him.

The effect was immediate. A flood of sensation: the soft linen of Susan's nightgown, the feel of her bare wrists around his neck. Her fingertips in his hair, lighting a thousand sparks in every nerve as she stroked him. The weight of her body as she pressed herself to him, the swell of her breasts and hips shockingly evident—and her face so close to his, that reserved, beautiful face, those blue eyes now full of yearning as she brushed the tip of her nose against his.

The movement sent a jolt of pleasure through him that was impossible to ignore. Impossible not to respond to, even if his mind begged his body to be reasonable. Jack bit his lip as his cock hardened in his breeches, willing for it to go away of its own accord.

A woman had never done anything to him so sweet as a nose-brush. Not once. If they were with him, they wanted a brute—wanted to explore their darker side. But Susan let the tip of her nose rest against his again, for all the world as if they were two shy adolescents in a quiet alley after dark, working out how even the smallest movements could bring forth pleasure.

Her lips met his. Jack closed his eyes, pushing away the wave of delight with all the strength he had left, and pulled away from her. 'I'm sorry.'

'You saved me.'

'It was a nightmare. Nothing more than that.'

'You don't know what my nightmares are like.'

'Even so, all I did was wake you.'

'Come back.'

'I—I can't.'

'Do you not want to?'

He couldn't lie to her. It would be the most intelligent thing to do, but he'd stopped being intelligent the moment he'd walked into the room. 'It's not that.'

'Then what is it?'

'This isn't what you're paying me to do.'

Susan blinked again. When she replied, her sleep-addled voice rang with hurt. 'I wasn't thinking of money.'

'I know.'

'I... I just wanted to. Was that wrong?'

'No.' If they had met any other way, knowing that she wanted to be with him would leave him walking on air. As it was, he had to remain weighted to the earth. 'But I can't.'

Susan looked at him for a long, pained moment. Then she lay back

down on the mattress, curled into herself with a resignation that made Jack's heart ache. 'I understand.'

'You don't.' She didn't know how much it killed him to refuse her. How much he longed for this, despite knowing that it would be an atrocious complication in his sparse, stale life. 'Truly.'

'But I don't have you. Because you're doing your job, and I have no right to inquire further.' Susan's voice was gentle, which made her words all the more hurtful. 'I'm sorry.'

'You don't need to be sorry.'

'But I am.' Susan drew the blankets over herself. 'And we'll say no more about it.'

'Miss Blake, I—'

'Thank you for saving me. Goodnight. If I have another nightmare, don't come in.'

He'd never seen someone in such clear need of comfort, even if she was rejecting it outright. Jack stayed kneeling, watching the back of Susan's head as her curls gently settled against the pillow.

This was wrong. He couldn't be here, he couldn't do this. But even though his mind was full of reason, his heart threatened to rip itself to shreds if he left this woman now, in her hour of need.

He could simply stay here. He could watch over her as she slept, drinking in every detail of her face and form. But after what Susan had done, what she had said, simply observing her felt like cowardice.

Or perhaps he was merely lying to himself. Either way, he was going to do something that he'd regret in the near future. But that future didn't exist, not yet—and this was now, and a beautiful, brave woman needed to be comforted, and for some impossible reason she'd decided that he was the man who could do the job.

Gently, slowly, he rested his hand on the mattress. Susan didn't move, but her breathing hitched; she hadn't fallen asleep, then. 'What are your nightmares about?'

'My father. Who else?'

That bastard. 'What happens?'

'It... it's the day the letter appears in the papers. I'm sitting at the breakfast table, and my father picks up the Mayfair Herald.' Susan paused. 'And he reads the letter, starts to laugh, and—and then he reads my name underneath it, along with those of my friends. And he stops laughing. And even though I know it's a dream, that I could wake, I'm trapped. I can't rise from the breakfast table, it's as if I'm weighted down... forgive me. It—it pains me to discuss it.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. I think it would help to have it examined in the light, as it were.' Susan paused, the shape of the blankets shifting as she sighed. 'But I'm frightened to do so.'

He'd never seen courage like it. Giving into the moment, letting every last reservation grow, Jack moved onto the mattress.

He was too bulky for it. There was a strained sound from the fabric, as if the goose feathers were protesting in alarm at his muscles; he sank into the thing as if it were a glass of water. But eventually, once he had settled his head on the pillow and breathed in the scent of Susan's hair, her locks now practically touching his lips, a curious kind of erotic comfort spread through him.

Susan hadn't moved. She was still curled as tightly as she was before, her face turned away from him. But as Jack slowly put his arm around her waist, holding her, she sighed with such full-bodied relief that despite the idiocy of what he was doing, the foolishness of it, he couldn't feel anything but relief that he'd made such a dangerous choice.

'I know it pains you. You don't have to talk about it.' His fingertips rested against the linen of her nightgown. He could feel her stomach through the thin material; she shivered at his touch. 'But I'm here. I'll protect you.'

'You are here.'

'I'm here.' Whatever he said here didn't have to matter. Did it? He could be honest. 'I don't want to be anywhere else.'

Susan shifted backward. Jack restrained a gasp as she curled against him; here she was, the curve of her back, the sharp planes of her shoulders. She could fit against him like this, snug as a bird in a nest. Safe. 'I... I don't want to be anywhere else either.'

She was so fragile. One wrong move and she'd jump away from him. This wasn't seduction—she didn't want to be chased, and he didn't want to chase her. This was a meeting, a union where even the smallest gesture seemed to ring with meaning, and he would need to be slower. Better. 'You can be whatever you like here. Do whatever you like.'

'I... I can keep talking. I can bring it into the light.'

'Whatever you need to do.'

'And... and my father begins to chase me through the house. It sounds almost comical, when I say it like that, but it's frightening in the dream. My feet are like lead—the floor impedes me. And when he finally catches me, which he always does, and when he takes the hairbrush and begins to beat me with it, it—it hurts, because of course it does, but it isn't what hurts most. What hurts most is my mother watching from the corner. She doesn't try to fight him. It's as if she's watching something completely commonplace. It—it's how it happens in reality, of course, and in reality I try not to feel anything about it. But in the dream... it's as if all my agony is there, immovable, and I simply have to feel it. All of it at once.'

He would find her townhouse. He would burn it to the ground and make sure her parents were locked in with no means of escape. 'I'm sorry.'

'So am I. But—but it's a nightmare. A memory. It's gone.'

'And if it comes back, I'm here.' It was difficult not to tighten his arm around her, but Susan had to feel free. He didn't want her to feel trapped in any way. 'I'm bigger than any nightmare. Worse, too.'

'I wish I could dream of you. No nightmare would survive if you were in it.'

'You don't need to dream of me.' He couldn't help it. The slightest stroke of her stomach sent a thrill of pleasure through him that made him bite his lip. 'I'm here. And I'll be here when you wake again.'

'But...'

'But?'

'But I don't want to sleep.' Susan's palm gently covered Jack's hand. Her fingertips danced over him; Jack held his breath as she clasped his hand, holding it tight. 'Not now.'

He would have been content to have her sleep in his arms. He could tell himself that again and again until it almost felt true. But knowing that Susan wanted something more, whatever that meant, sent a rush of happiness through Jack that was impossible to ignore.

'No. I don't want to sleep.' He stroked her thumb with his own. 'But I—I don't want to frighten you.'

'How could you frighten me?'

'By—by being too strong. Too fast.'

'You've never been too strong or fast with me. Not once. I doubt you're going to start now.'

She had such faith in him. Had he really demonstrated such trustworthiness to her? Perhaps she was so damaged by her father's wrath that any man felt stable compared to him. 'You put too much trust in me.'

'Do you truly believe you'll hurt me?'

'No.' The answer came immediately. 'I'd rather die than hurt you.'

'Exactly.' Susan's murmur was so quiet he could barely hear it.

'And I knew that as soon as I looked at you.'

That look over the table at the pub. The look he still remembered at odd moments, as if his mind kept trying to unlock some secret in it. Perhaps that was the secret; he'd never had anyone trust him immediately, without words.

It was precious. More precious than anything he'd ever owned. Jack squeezed Susan's hand, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips to the back of her neck.

God, her skin smelled good. Like honey and salt, like something you never wanted to be without. He tried to keep the kiss light, a



gentle brush of his lips, his face buried deep in her hair. Susan trembled against him; for a moment Jack wondered if he should withdraw, if she was frightened, but the way she pressed herself even more firmly against him changed his mind. Changed his mind enough to let him kiss his way along the side of her neck, the curve of her shoulder, until his lips met her nightgown—and then to trace back, following the pattern of his previous kisses, tasting her. A dizzying exercise in restraint, in slowness; his cock was rock-hard between his thighs, every part of him aching, but he wouldn't give in. Not if this introduction to passion was what Susan needed, the pace she required.

'Ohh.' Her gentle sigh as he kissed the lobe of her ear let him know that he was doing his job well. 'It's... it's good.'

'I'm glad.' Jack took her earlobe between his teeth as lightly as he could, tasting her there. Susan's sigh had a hint of a whimper this time; her palm shivered in his. 'And this?'

'Good.'

'And if you were to turn around and kiss me as you did before?'

'You pulled away last time.'

'I won't this time.' If only she knew how long he'd stay if she let him. 'I promise.'

Susan turned immediately. The blankets formed a wall between them; Jack pulled them away with a clenched fist; he had to be gentle with Susan, but he could ripped these damned things in two if he wanted. He gritted his teeth, not wanting to sigh with pleasure as Susan came to him, her arm around his waist just as he put his own arm around her, moving so close to him that they felt like one body.

She had to feel how hard he was in his breeches. It would be impossible to ignore. Susan gave no sign of having felt him, though—instead her lips were against his, almost clumsy in her eagerness to kiss him, and warmth flooded Jack like sunlight on a spring day. A sudden, exuberant rush of joy that brought a gasp to his throat, restrained with real difficulty as Susan covered her mouth with his.

He'd never had a kiss like it. A kiss that combined the awkwardness of someone just beginning with the playfulness of someone who knew exactly what they wanted to feel. Jack couldn't help but open his lips, deepening the kiss by slow, agonising degrees as his hand wrapped tighter around Susan's waist. All he had to do was let her lead; to let her grow brave enough to graze her teeth against his bottom lip, to brush her tongue against his in a devastatingly intimate dance. All of it was in service to her courage—to teach her that she would be safe here, with him, however much she wanted to experiment or explore.

'You don't need to wait for me.' Susan whispered against his lips.

'What you you mean?'

'You can—can touch me, if you want.'

'Not if you don't want to.'

'I'll tell you if you need to stop. And—and I give you permission to start.'

God, this was torture. The best, most pleasurable kind of torture; a kind he didn't want to stop. Jack nodded, unable to stop a shiver running through his body as Susan kissed him again, and ran his hand down her back to the curve of her buttocks.

He couldn't help but grunt as he held her there. She simply felt so damned good, like she was made for him to grip her there. He pulled at the skirts of her nightgown, material bunched in his fists, then slowly placed his fingertips against her bare skin. 'May I?'

'Yes. Please.'

How good it felt to caress her there. To run his hands in slow circles, taking in the shape of her; to feel her respond to him, kiss him with more decisiveness. When he reached down to her inner thighs, the heat of her made Jack grunt again. 'Fuck.'

'What's wrong.'

'Nothing.' She was wet. He could feel traces of her desire on her skin; he let his hands rest there, just under the curve of her buttocks. 'You just feel so good. I—I'm sorry I swore.'

Susan laughed. The soft, intimate sound of delight, of pleasure, made Jack's head spin. 'Do the usual rules of politeness count here?'

'Not normally.'

'But this isn't normal.'

'No. This is better.'

Susan appeared to have no answer to that. Just as Jack began to worry that he'd said too much, gone too far, she kissed him with a sigh of pleasure that made the feel of her under his hands all the sweeter.

Christ, he wanted his hands on her cunt. He couldn't pretend otherwise. 'Where do you ache?'

'What do you mean?'

'Where do you feel like you need to be touched? Tell me.'

'I... you're near to it now.'

'Can I stroke you there?'

'... Yes.'

'You hesitated. You have to be sure.'

'I only hesitated because I know it's indelicate to give permission to do such a thing immediately. At least, I'm sure it must be.'

'Not here. Not with me.' Jack moved his hand slightly higher. Now he could feel how slick she was; Christ, she was ready. 'All right?'

'Yes.'

'Then ask me.'

‘Please stroke me there. Please.’

*Thank you.* Jack kissed the corner of her mouth, taking in Susan’s gasp of pleasure, and moved his hand higher still.

He’d never had something feel so sweetly illicit. The meeting of her thighs, the soft, downy patch of curls that he knew would be as blonde as her hair. The way Susan whimpered, the sound so clearly pleasurable as opposed to the painful sounds that came with her nightmare, as he gently stroked his fingers along her outer lips. She would be as beautiful as Venus there, he knew it, all pink and pale with her golden curls, but he couldn’t ask to look at it. Not yet, anyway.

But he could touch her. He could let his fingers gently slip through to her inner lips, folded like the petals of a budding rose, where she was slick and ready for him. He could caress her here, occasionally putting his whole palm against her to feel her mound in his hand, kissing her with maddening patience as Susan gasped, moaned against his lips, began to thrust her hips down towards his hand.

‘Like this?’

‘Yes.’

‘You feel so good.’ He’d never wished he was a poet before, but she deserved more than his simple words. ‘I wish I knew how to say it better.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I never get the words right.’

‘You’re—you’re silly.’ Another rush of that laughter as she kissed him again. ‘So silly. So sweet.’

He’d never been described as silly or sweet in his entire life. They were things he’d always tried to actively avoid being. But here on this mattress with his hand between Susan’s legs, Jack realised they were things he could easily embrace.

‘I can be sweeter.’ He brushed his fingers against her bud. Susan whimpered, biting her lip. ‘You see?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I do it again?’

Susan nodded urgently. Jack restrained a smile, realised he didn’t have to, and let himself show his happiness as he stroked her bud again.

He’d never been like this before. Slow, patient, deliberate. As if he could replace every cruel blow Susan had ever suffered with a pleasurable touch, a kiss, a murmur in her ear telling her just how beautiful she looked and felt. He needed to cancel out all the damage that had been done to her, restoring the beauty and excitement that should have been her birthright with every movement of his fingers.

He wasn’t hurried either. Not in the least. Time took second place

to this process, this infinite discovery—the slow, delicious build up as Susan trembled, moaning, until she whispered tightly in his ear.

‘I feel as if there’s a—a knot inside me. It’s going to unravel.’

‘Let it go.’

‘I can?’

‘Yes. You don’t need my permission.’ He flickered his fingers over her bud harder, faster. ‘Let it go.’

She was so sweet as she came. There was an innocence to her despite the brazenness with which she clutched at him, her desire flooding his slick palm as he held her, kissed her. Caressed her as gently as he could until she’d stopped trembling, until the last traces of her climax had ended.

He was still rock-hard. He’d never been so aroused, never wanted anyone quite so much. But this wasn’t the time, not now—the only thing he wanted to do was please her, take away every last piece of the nightmare that haunted her.

And he’d done it. He’d served his purpose. As Susan snuggled into his chest, her breathing slowing, reality crept back into Jack’s mind by slow degrees.

This was a betrayal of the woman in his arms. He’d given into desire rather than concentrated on the most important thing: her protection. Susan was desperate, despite the air of cool rationality she carried with her—of course she’d reach out and cling to the first solid, secure person that crossed her path. And rather than treat her with the dispassionate respect she deserved, he had taken advantage of her weakened state.

Shame washed over him, drowning out his desire. He kept as still as he could, squeezing his eyes tight shut.

He would hold her like this until he fell asleep again. Then he would wrap her in blankets, leave the room, and keep her at arm’s length until all of this was over. And no matter what the temptation, no matter how fierce it was, he would never fall prey to his worst instincts again.

Sunlight. Sunlight, a soft mattress, and a heavy feeling of satisfaction in each and every muscle. Susan woke with a start, flooded with instinctive tension as she pulled the thin blanket around herself.

But her father wasn’t downstairs, nursing an aching head and a growing sense of rage. She wouldn’t be expected to dress as quickly as possible and run to the breakfast table to try and appease him, a task destined to end in failure. Her father was far away, cut out of her life and cast asunder, and she was free. Free, well-rested, and... and full of pleasure from the previous night, as glittering as a start.

Jack. He'd come to her when she'd needed him. He'd saved her. Susan closed her eyes, a slow smile spreading over her face.

Was this how people normally woke up? Satisfied, content, full of happiness for what the day could bring? She lay silently in her blankets, relishing the moment for a short, precious period of silence before the scent of coffee caught her attention.

A cup and saucer lay a little way from the bed, steam rising into the air. Next to it lay a plate with a roll. Susan blinked, sitting up fully.

So Jack wasn't getting them food for the day. He'd left her; left her some time ago if the cold of the space next to her was anything to go by.

A gentle creak of floorboards came from outside the door. Jack was outside, then, as he'd been before her nightmare. As if nothing had happened.

Not promising. Not promising at all. But given what she'd already lived through, this hurt was manageable. 'I'm awake.'

A short silence. Then Jack's voice through the door. 'Good. Eat and get ready.'

'Have you eaten?'

'That's not your concern.'

'If you don't come in, I'm not going to eat or get ready.'

'You will.'

'I won't.' She had to hold her nerve.

After a long, intense pause, the door opened. Jack entered, deliberately looking at everything else in the room but her. He looked so out of place with four walls around him, a roof on top—a man of his size, his strength, needed clear sky overhead to look real.

He was beautiful. Susan blinked, pulling herself from her reverie. 'Sit and eat with me.'

'No.' Jack turned around, standing as if the mattress was a jewel in need of guarding. 'I'm not hungry.'

'Are you truly going to stand with your back to me as I eat?'

'Yes.'

'Even if there's no-one who could possibly trouble us?'

'You don't know that.'

'And you're not going to eat anything yourself.'

'No.' Jack half-turned. Susan had never seen a grimmer profile. 'I'm not.'

Not the most optimistic of mornings, given what had happened the previous night. Susan slowly drank her coffee, eating her buttered roll in small, careful bites and saving several pieces for the mice, until she set down her empty plate on the bare floorboards. 'Well. I've finished.'

‘And?’

‘You can’t stand with your back to me if I’m doing absolutely nothing to occupy myself.’

‘I can.’

‘But you don’t have to.’

‘You paid me to do this, so I’m doing this.’ A low rumble of frustration had crept into Jack’s voice. ‘Protect you. Nothing else.’

‘Please stop.’

‘No.’

‘... Please. I beg you.’

Jack turned. Susan waited until his shoulders slumped, until he opened his mouth to speak.

He sounded so grim. ‘What happened last night shouldn’t have happened.’

‘It didn’t just... happen. It wasn’t a snowstorm or an eclipse.’ Truth be told, she didn’t know how to describe it. It was as if they’d both been possessed by a divine madness, something words were incapable of describing. ‘You chose, I chose.’

‘And we shouldn’t have chosen.’

‘So you say.’

‘I mean it.’ Jack’s tone made him seem so impassable, but Susan could see the cracks in him. The hairline fractures that were in danger of collapsing into fragments, revealing something new. Something raw. ‘It was a mistake.’

‘I see.’

‘Don’t argue with me.’

‘I’m not arguing with you. I haven’t raised a single counter-argument. So kindly stop treating me like an enemy, please.’

He was scared. It was as clear as day beneath the façade. But she wouldn’t accept even a hint of coarse treatment: not here, not now, with the sun streaming through the window and her body still full of relaxed, womanly satisfaction. Susan held his stare, finding any spare scraps of courage and using them until Jack finally dropped his gaze.

‘I’m ashamed of myself.’ His voice was very quiet. ‘Of what I did.’

‘You did nothing that I didn’t want. Nothing incorrect.’

‘You’re fleeing something awful. You don’t know what you want.’ Jack’s eyes met hers again, his gaze steady this time. ‘And I don’t mean that as an insult. It’s the truth.’

Susan opened her mouth, ready to fight back. To prove to him that she knew exactly what she wanted now that she was free to do so. Then she closed her mouth again as the essential truth of Jack’s words sunk in.

She’d spent so long surviving that other sentiments couldn’t quite be trusted. Not yet. Every feeling she had, even joy, was tinged with a

kind of desperation—a fear that it would all be taken away, would vanish in the night. The way she'd clung to Jack, begging for pleasure, was as much evidence of panic as desire.

'You're right.' Her coffee felt sour in her stomach. 'I suppose.'

Jack nodded. Susan was almost sure she saw disappointment in his eyes, a flash of something dark and wounded, but she couldn't clutch at it. He lowered himself to the floor, sitting awkwardly opposite her as if he would rather be anywhere else.

It was worse now, finishing her breakfast with his eyes on her. Every glance brought back memories of how tender he'd been with her the previous night, the delight he'd taken in every part of her pleasure. Now it was all gone, all trapped behind a wall of stone. 'Where are we—oh.'

'What?'

'I was going to ask where we were going today. Then I remembered not to ask questions.'

'We're going to the house you'll stay in until your next plan is firm in your head. A cottage.'

'... Oh.' Susan took a careful sip of her remaining coffee. It was best not to show too much surprise at the unexpected level of detail; he definitely wouldn't like it if she called attention to his sudden openness. 'I see.'

'So finish as quickly as you can. I don't want to spend any more time here than we have to.'

'Because I could be found?'

'Because it's a sewage pit.' Jack's expression didn't change as Susan laughed, but she was almost sure his eyes crinkled a little. 'But also because, yes, it's a good idea to get out of London today. Before people start looking.'

The idea of her father reaching for her sent a cold shiver down Susan's spine. He wasn't the sort of man who'd be cunning about it, spreading rumours that his daughter had run away or had been too free with her favours. He would start to comb the streets as soon as the drink had ebbed away. 'Then let's leave as soon as we can.'

She reached for the empty plate that had held her roll. Jack reached for it at the same time; their fingers brushed, lingered.

*Don't take his hand.* It would make a mockery of her decision to be wise. But all the same, driven by a force far too strong for her to combat, Susan took hold of his rough, weathered palm.

Yes. The power between them practically set the air alight. That sudden rush of knowledge, of connection—that wasn't desperation. What she felt coursing through her body now, desire and contentment dancing together in eerie but irresistible tandem, was the closest she'd ever felt to true peace.

Jack was probably right. She didn't know what she wanted when it came to many things: what her future life would look like, where it would be, what she would do for money.

But she knew, knew with complete certainty, that she wanted Jack.

His voice in her ear. His body against hers. The sense of security that clung to him like a second skin, making everyone around him feel safe. She wanted that, would keep wanting that no matter what else changed.

If only she had met him in different circumstances. A place and time where Jack could trust her feelings rather than being naturally suspicious of them. Susan withdrew her hand, a dark cloud covering the brightness that shone inside her.

She was free. Free of her father, free of the violence that had dogged her ever since she'd been old enough to walk. That was all that could matter, all that she could concentrate on now if she wished to be anything close to happy. Her certainty about Jack, both of the nature of her feelings and their strength, had to be pushed deep down inside her until she was away from London.

'I'll get dressed.' She rose to her feet; Jack abruptly did the same. 'Be sure to thank the owners of this place for their hospitality.'

'I will.'

'Should I wear my bonnet?'

'Yes.' Jack turned away, heading for the door. The raw, husky edge to his voice sent a wave of longing through Susan. 'You're not out of the woods yet.'

The cottage was hidden at the end of miles of wild, tangled paths, most of them too small to allow a large carriage. Once they had been interrupted by three cows placidly walking down the road, their fringes buzzing with tiny flies as they'd turned to the gig in confusion, and then there had been a flock of geese that had run madly in all directions, squawking their displeasure.

Jack had gathered all of the geese back into their original gaggle, leaping from the gig with such purpose that the foolish birds had been too frightened to rebel any further. Susan had watched him from the gig, hands over her mouth to restrain her laughter as Jack grimly ushered each goose into its proper place, stamping his foot at those who dared squawk at him.

When one particularly large goose bit him on the finger, causing him to swear with such violent force that another goose actually laid an egg, Susan couldn't help but laugh. Laugh so loudly and for so long that by the time she'd finished, tears of joy streaming down her face, the geese were already travelling down a side-path to their unknown



destination and Jack was standing in the middle of the road, hands on hips, a hawthorn petal floating into his hair and staying there.

He looked so beautiful. So completely out-of-place, but beautiful enough to stop her heart. She tried to keep smiling as she looked at him, responding to the happiness in his eyes, but the fact that he would soon be leaving her made it almost impossible to do.

They went on. Another hour passed. After Susan had counted a hundred seconds, she slipped her arm through Jack's. She stiffened, waiting for him to withdraw it, but all he did was draw her arm closer and hold it tight.

Eventually, they came to a clearing. In the centre of a small copse of silver birches stood a cottage, ivy covering it almost completely, a tangle of wild roses growing around the door and up to the thatched roof. As Susan stared at it, breathing in the gentle green scent of the air, Jack let go of her arm and jumped out of the gig.

'No-one knows this place is here apart from me. Don't tell anyone but your closest friends about it.' He stroked the manes of the horses, producing an apple from his pocket and giving it to one of them to munch. 'There's a well at the back, and a spring a little way into the copse if you want fresher water or to wash your clothes. Wood if you want a fire in the shed—I've cut down enough for you to make your way through two winters at least. If you want to hire a maid—'

'I don't.'

'You don't?'

'No.' Susan slipped off of the gig, landing on the springy grass. The very earth felt as if it was welcoming her. 'I'll be perfectly content without staff.'

Enough servants. Enough eyes watching her behind closed doors, either too indifferent or too frightened to help her. Whatever life she was to live here before she went to the Continent, or Scotland, or *somewhere*, would be lived as simply as possible.

And it would be lived alone. If Jack was as firm as he claimed to be, she would wake and sleep without anyone else. Susan took a few steps towards the cottage, her heart full of painful, trembling excitement.

'I'll be able to fall asleep and wake up when I wish to. Without being afraid.' She approached the door. She touched the roses that wreathed around it; they were so soft, so delicate, but their scent was richer than the finest hothouse bloom. 'I can decide where I want to go.'

'Where do you want to go?'

'Nowhere, until I'm made to.'

'As I said—only I know about this place for the time being.'

'Then I can have at least one visitor, for the time being.'

Jack didn't answer. Susan turned away from the pain in his eyes, the sudden rigidity of his posture, and put her hand to the cottage door.

The key was in the lock. She opened it and walked inside, Jack following.

The cottage was small and snug, the sound of the wind through the copse penetrating the walls in a soothing manner. Everything was warmly painted wood, darned blankets on furniture that looked old and much-loved; Susan smiled as she closed the front door, briefly charmed by the ring of flowers that had been painted around the key-hole. There was a kitchen, if the array of jugs and plates on a well-worn wooden table was anything to go by, and a small study with a desk that overlooked a large window. And a bedroom, with a four-poster bed—but she couldn't think of beds.

The study felt like the safest room, for now. She walked over the threshold, biting back a smile as Jack ducked to cross it, and walked over to the window. 'Who does this house belong to?'

'Me. An inheritance.'

'I can't imagine you coming from a small cottage in the woods.'

'I never met the uncle who bequeathed it to me. He had no children of his own.'

'And have you ever lived in it?'

'Of course no. I get twitchy if I'm not within ten feet of a pub.'

'But it doesn't look abandoned.'

'I bring people here who need to disappear. Like you.'

Who else had walked through this tiny series of rooms? Who had looked out of this window at the garden beyond it, its wild sprays of flowers? Susan ran her hand along the windowsill for a moment, noting how clean it was. 'When did the last person leave?'

'You know I can't tell you that. But you can stay here for as long as you need it—until you've organised the next stage of your journey.'

The next stage of the journey. Scotland, Wales, the Continent; they had all seemed so possible, so easy to plunge into and create a whole new life. Now, with Jack standing in front of her and his face unreadable, anything beyond this point seemed unfathomable.

'And... and when must you leave me?' She couldn't stop her voice from trembling. 'Soon, I imagine.'

'There are always people that need my services.'

'So you'll leave immediately. This is goodbye.'

'No.' Jack paused. When he spoke again, his voice was strained. 'That's not what I said.'

'But you did say it. Just not in so many words.' She had to be firm. She'd been too vulnerable the previous night, asking for things she'd had no right to ask for, and she was causing Jack pain that could be

avoided. Never mind her own pain—she was used to it. ‘I would hate to keep you from other individuals in need of help.’

‘I can judge whether people are in urgent need of me or not.’

‘Can you?’ She needed him. Her need for him was achingly evident, as if she were naked before him. ‘Can you?’

Suddenly, all the strength from previous days left her. It was as if some cord had snapped, her strings cut; her knees buckled as she gripped the windowsill to keep upright. All of her courage drained away, leaving nothing but the stark horror of an undecided future.

She dimly heard Jack’s quick footsteps behind her. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing.’ She had to recover herself. If these moment came again when she was alone, there would be no-one to help her. ‘Nothing you need to worry about.’

‘Don’t be spiteful with me.’

‘I’m—I’m not being spiteful.’ What was worse: being accused of spitefulness or suspecting herself of it? ‘I’m simply telling you an inconvenient truth.’

‘Tell me what’s wrong. Now.’

‘I’m frightened. That’s all. Frightened. But I won’t stop being frightened when you’re gone, and fear isn’t a good enough reason to ask you to stay, so—’

She stopped, her words vanishing, as Jack gathered her into his arms.

His grip was so uncompromising. It cleared her mind, as if his touch chased away panic. Susan buried her face in his chest, allowing her feet to leave the ground as she surrendered herself to his embrace.

‘Fear is good.’ Jack’s voice was gruff, his angry tone hiding something deeper. ‘Fear reminds you that you’re alive. It helps you save yourself. Fear brought you here, it brought you to me, so you respect it. All right?’

‘Yes.’

‘And it makes sense to be afraid. It’s new. If you were comfortable here without any fear, it would be strange.’

‘Yes.’

‘And until you’re less afraid, or not afraid at all, I’ll be here.’

‘What?’

‘I’ll stay until you feel better. All right?’

‘You... you can’t.’

‘I can. I will.’ His hand was so reassuring on the base of her neck, as if he’d taken the weight of all her problems. ‘So stop fighting me. Please.’

She was only fighting him because she wanted to surrender so much. Even though it would break her heart. But Jack was so fierce,

so determined, so unbearably handsome in his rough linen shirt, his kerchief, the faded blue ink on his skin contrasting perfectly with his sun-brown skin as he held her tight to him.

It was wrong to feel desire here and now. How strange that her body could contain such multitudes; fear, excitement, despair, lust. But before he could kiss Jack, wrap her arms around him, Jack set her abruptly back down on the floor. 'You're tired. You need to eat.'

'We need to eat. You must be angry too.'

Jack frowned. 'I suppose I am. The woman I pay will have left food.'

'Then I'll prepare something.'

'You can cook?'

'Not many servants stay in my father's townhouse for long periods.' Most of them had either run out of the house sobbing in the middle of the day or left in the dead of night, leaving Susan with breakfast to make before her father woke up and grew angry. 'One quickly learns to adapt.'

'I'll cut some wood.'

'You said there's enough wood for two winters.'

'I'll cut some anyway. There's plenty to do outside.'

'Why? Are you frightened to stay in the house with me?' She was frightened too. How could Jack not know that? 'There's plenty to do outside.'

Jack shrugged. He looked tired, roughened by life, but there was an unconscious grace to every movement that made Susan catch her breath. 'I'll come in when it gets dark.'

He hadn't been lying. In the countryside there was always something to do: leaves to sweep from the path, cracks in the stonework to plug with mud or dried grass so the wind wouldn't blow through. Things he'd learned during summers spent fruit picking as a child, back-breaking work and living in the open air before the city with its factories drew them back again. Jack moved from job to job as slowly as he possibly could, making sure each thing was done correctly, but he was still left with far too much time to look at Susan through the windows. Susan moving dreamily from room to room, her hair glowing in the candlelight as she peeled, chopped, stirred.

He couldn't stay away forever. Something deep in him was drawn to her like a moth to a flame, bringing him closer and closer to the cottage as evening deepened into night. By the time the first stars appeared, almost lost in the flushed pink of the sunset, a delicious smell had filled the clearing.

Susan stood in the doorway. Framed by the roses she looked like a saint: more beautiful than Jack could comprehend.

He didn't need to speak. Words were useless. With nothing more than a soft nod of his head, Jack brushed past her and walked into the kitchen.

The erotic scent of her skin mingled with the smell of whatever bubbled on the range, mingling hunger and desire for a brief, arresting moment. Jack slowly settled into the armchair in the corner of the room, watching Susan as she turned back to the range. She stirred a pot of what looked like stew, smiling as she glanced at Jack. 'I think I've managed it.'

'It smells as if you have.'

'I spent a lot of time in the kitchen as a child. Evidently I remember the elements of a good meal.'

'A good meal means a happy home. The dream of every woman.'

'Why would I have ever dreamed of making a happy home? I've never seen one at close quarters. I wouldn't even know how to start dreaming about it.'

It was true. The comment had been so lazy, and he'd said it without thinking. 'I'm sorry.'

'There's no need to be.'

'There is.'

'In any case, I've often imagined a home. But I've never been ambitious enough to imagine a happy one. The most I've succeeded in imagining is a safe one. A home where no-one can find me.'

'Well.' She looked so at home here. As if she'd always been here under this low roof, herbs soft and fragrant in her hands as she tore, tasted, stirred. 'You have one now.'

'Not really.' Susan's eyes were very beautiful and very sad. 'Not forever.'

He couldn't answer that. The only words that came to mind were words he couldn't say. He stayed quiet, sinking even deeper into the overly-stuffed armchair as Susan looked on in silence.

Only once they were sat in front of one another, a bowl of steaming stew on the worn wooden table between them, did Susan speak again. 'Do you know anything about happy homes?'

'I suppose. Mine was happy enough.'

'What was it like?'

For a moment Jack didn't know how to respond. He'd put away all memories of his childhood home away somewhere; they could only interfere with the brutal work he so often had to do. 'There was no money.'

'But you were all happy anyway.'

'Yes.' Jack pushed the bowl of stew towards Susan, spooning some of it onto her plate. 'For a time, we were.'

Slowly hesitantly, he began to talk. It was as if the evening, his

surroundings, had unlocked something in him—or perhaps it was Susan in front of him, listening so attentively. Listening as if he was teaching her something, even if all he was doing was talking about the few memories of growing up where he had. Five brothers and sisters, he the youngest of the lot, all of them crammed into a dirty slum near the tanneries where the air stank of urine and horsehair day and night. His mother constantly scrubbing, cleaning or cooking, his father staggering home covered in soot at the end of another backbreaking day of work... but always, always, there had been laughter.

There had been so much humour, so much love and care. The whole street had taken care of them; they'd roamed London from morning to night, getting into scrape after scrape, spending half their time inventing new forms of mischief and the other half running from the law. All that running, hiding, fighting tooth and nail, only to come home at sundown and eat bread and dripping together by the glow of the fire.

They'd been happy. Ignorant of how disadvantaged they were, but happy all the same.

'It sounds wonderful.'

'It was.'

He couldn't say anything else. It was too much to look at her, to speak with her, knowing that this would end. Jack took a mouthful of stew, settling into a silence that was so comfortable he almost didn't trust it.

He waited until the very last of the daylight had drained away, until the small clearing in the copse shone with starlight instead, to rise from his chair. 'I... I should...'

'You should leave, of course.'

'Of course.' Truth be told, he'd been expecting more resistance. Jack stood awkwardly in the tiny parlour, trying not to feel quite so disappointed. Susan was still looking at the fire, her hair almost glowing in the crackling flames. 'Before the road gets too dark to travel on.'

'And the horses have been fed, yes?'

'Yes.'

'Then you're ready.'

'I am.'

'But—'

'But?'

'But is there one last thing you could do for me? A small favour.' Susan turned to him, her face half-illuminated in the firelight. She looked impossible: too beautiful to be real, to be so close to him. 'If you could.'

He should have expected something of this kind. Jack swallowed

down a feeling of triumph, of excitement. 'I've already said we can't —'

'I know. Don't accuse me of not listening to you, or not understanding. Asking openly for such a thing is—is forbidden between us. You've forbidden it, and I can do nothing but respect that.' Susan paused for a long moment. 'I wished to ask for—for something else.'

What else could she possibly ask of him? He'd given her a safe place, a warm bed, a way to hide from her family until she made her next move. He'd saved her, to all intents and purposes. And she had to know, somewhere deep within her, that if she kept asking he would keep giving. Giving and giving and giving until there was nothing of him left, all to make sure that she was happy.

'You talked about happy homes this afternoon.' Susan took a deep breath. 'You spoke about how happy your family was.'

'It wasn't perfect.'

'But you were happy. As a family, as a home. And before you leave, before it gets too dark, I'd like you to pretend with me.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'Pretend that—that this house is a home, a real home, and we have always lived in it. I know it sounds insane.' Susan blinked. 'Even more insane now that I've said the words aloud. But I face a future in which I will have to make a home of some kind, and I would like it to be a happy one, and... and I don't know how to do it. You do.'

'You sound mad.'

'I know.'

'Do you mean a—a home with a man?' He couldn't help but ask the question. The idea of it tugged at something dark in him, something that wanted to bite however much he repressed it. 'Despite your little letter?'

'Perhaps with someone. Perhaps alone.' Susan sighed, her tone of rueful weariness as hurtful to Jack as a burning brand. He'd done worse than hurt her; he'd belittled her. 'But it doesn't matter.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Thank you.'

'Truly.'

'You should leave.'

'Please—let me stay. You wanted me to pretend. To teach you.' The thought of leaving after he'd made such a foolish mistake was unconscionable. 'I can do that.'

'You can?'

'Yes.'

'Do you promise?'

'Yes.' Jack reached out and took her hand. Anything to stop her

looking quite so alone. 'I promise.'

It was only as the words left his lips that he realised he was touching her. Not through necessity or accident; he had chosen to take her soft white palm in his large, grizzled hand as if it were a natural thing to do, not something to take gross offence at. And he was keeping hold of her hand too, holding it tight, as if he were worried that he would blink and realise that all of it had been a dream.

Susan gasped. It was the slightest intake of breath, but the sound shot through Jack's body like whisky. Slowly, with clear reluctance, she removed her hand. 'Thank you.'

'I'm not very good at pretending.'

'I think you are.'

'What do you mean?'

'I think you pretend to be much less nice than you actually are.'

Susan yawned, her hand covering her mouth, and Jack was overcome by a wave of tenderness. 'But please—pretend now, with me. Pretend you've come home from whatever work you do, out here in the country, and that I'm here to greet you.'

'I'm going to feel very stupid trying.'

'But try anyway. Please. And then, once it's finished, you can get in your carriage and never be silly again.'

Never be silly again? Never be as soft and quiet and foolish as he was being now, all because Susan was far away from him? Such a fate felt worse than death, but he'd already cut himself off from anything else. 'Fine.'

How to begin? It was such a strange request. Jack tried to cast his mind back to the pretend games he used to play as a boy with his brothers, but they'd all been treasure and plunder-based. Skills gained from pretending to be a pirate weren't going to help him here. He stood, ignoring Susan's puzzled frown, and slowly walked towards the door.

Perhaps the only way to do this without collapsing into laughter or dissolving into a puddle of awkwardness was to access the desire he'd trapped so fiercely. The instinctual, unwise part of him that he didn't dare to listen to, not anymore.

The part of him that said, in no uncertain terms, *surrender to this fantasy*.

He wanted this. A part of him craved it more than anything else. Ever since he'd seen Susan framed by the roses around the cottage doorway, something in him had hungered for that view. Hungered in a way that felt different from lovemaking, completely different—and the more he tried to rationalise it as some ridiculous collection of sentiments that had no basis in fact, he couldn't quite convince himself to give it up.



He was ready for this. More ready than Susan knew.

‘Well.’ He cleared his throat. ‘You would probably begin by complaining.’

‘Truly? That doesn’t sound very happy.’

‘It’s a joking kind of happiness. There’ll be some mishap, something that’s gone wrong over the course of the day. Invent something.’

‘Goodness.’ Susan folded her arms. ‘Um... a mouse ran away with one of our spoons.’

‘What? How big do you think country mice are?’

‘They don’t need to be big if they’re cunning enough.’ Susan laughed. ‘I don’t know. It’s the only thing I can think of.’

‘Fine. That works well enough.’

‘Well enough for what?’

‘For this.’

He’d seen his father do it to his mother a thousand times. Walk across the kitchen no matter how tired he was from the day’s work, wrap his arms around the woman he cared for, and sweep her off of her feet.

‘Don’t worry about the spoon. Don’t worry about the mouse.’ He held Susan tight in his arms as she giggled, her skirts a white froth cascading over them both. ‘I’ll twirl you until both don’t matter at all.’

‘If you twirl me I’ll drop the only spoon we have left!’

‘I’ll carve more spoons. All I have to do is learn how to carve them.’ It was dizzying to twirl her. To feel this much joy as something so simple as holding her close to him. To slowly come to a stop still holding her so tight, her face so close to his.

‘A happy home is easy, then.’ Susan’s murmur was indescribably sweet. ‘Easier than it looks.’

‘Only if there’s love in it.’ A forbidden word, but it left Jack’s lips all the same. ‘Only if there’s love.’

No pretending. Not any more. This really was a happy home, if only for now—and as Susan’s lips met his, her sigh filling him with indescribable lightness, Jack knew that he could make it happier still.

How had he ever thought he could resist this? Resist kissing her face, her neck, his tongue tracing over her collarbones as Susan cried out, leaning against the wall as she dropped the stew spoon. It clattered to the floor, but Jack didn’t care. He was drowning in the taste of her, caught in a dream he didn’t want to wake from as he gently tugged down the bodice of her gown, cupping her breasts in his hands as he kissed, sucked, kissed again.

He couldn’t hold back everything. It was a torturous, teasing mixture of suppressing his impulse to show her all of his strength, his passion, and allowing small glimpses of it to shine through—just

enough to make Susan whimper more, make even more delight flood her face. Jack bent his head to her breasts again, licking and sucking each flushed, swollen nipple as his cock grew rock-hard in his breeches, fighting the imposition of still being dressed.

He could take her right here in this tiny room that smelled of herbs and comfort. He could lay down his greatcoat and place her atop it, see the way her pale skin glowed against the rough tweed fabric. But this was Susan's first time, her first experience of something so precious, and some long-neglected noble instinct in Jack told him very firmly that this woman couldn't be taken like a tavern girl in an alley.

She was too important. She meant too much to him, even though he'd only known her for such a brief amount of time. Jack drew her too him, burying his face in her hair and breathing in the light, sweet scent before murmuring in her ear. 'I'm taking you to bed.'

'Is that what people in happy homes do?'

'Oh, yes. Even if the husband is as weary as a dog from work, he takes his wife to bed. At least, he does if she's anything like you.'

'Like me?'

'Important.'

'I've never been important.' Susan smiled. 'I like it.'

The things she said made Jack's heart break even as his cock pressed hard against his clothes. Not knowing how to reply, he kissed her instead as he gathered her into his arms. She was so light; Jack held her tight for a moment, just a moment, not wanting to hurt her.

He would hold her tight forever if he could. Make her a part of him. But he couldn't have these thoughts, not here and now. Not when his only duty was to give Susan pleasure.

He carried her into the bedroom. A waft of cotton and dried herbs filled his nostrils as he lay Susan down on the bed, drinking her in as Susan smiled up at him. Then, with a tremor of fear that he shook away with a restrained growl, he began to undress.

It was strange, removing his clothes in front of someone. Nearly all of his carnal encounters had been in the doorways of houses or at the end of alleys; no need to do anything more than unbutton his coat and push down a few other garments while pulling up a few others. Here in the candlelight, things were profoundly different; Susan was staring at him from the pillows, her eyes travelling slowly over his body as he removed his waistcoat, then his shirt.

Perhaps he was too odd to look at. 'You're staring at me.'

'I like staring at you.'

'You can't like staring at me.'

'Why? You're beautiful.' Susan blinked. 'If I can say that about a man.'

'I don't think you can.'

'I don't care. You're beautiful. You're... exciting.'

Exciting? He couldn't imagine anyone being excited by him. He wasn't one of those pale, smoothly urbane gentlemen that all the ladies lusted after. But as he slowly removed his shirt, the air of the bedroom warm against his skin, he saw a light in Susan's eyes that could only mean desire.

She found pleasure in looking at him. Erotic pleasure. Jack's cock stirred; he looked down at it, noting that his bulge was clearly visible to Susan.

'Keep going.' Susan paused. 'Please.'

'Only if you do something for me.'

'What should I do?'

'Touch yourself. Stroke yourself where it pleases you to do so.'

'Here? In—in front of you?'

'Pleasure for pleasure.' Jack unbuttoned his breeches, but didn't pull them down. He didn't have to be urgent here and now; he could wait, tease. 'I promise.'

Susan bit her lip. Her shy, trusting smile was everything; Jack knew he'd remember that expression for a long, long time. Then, brushing away a strand of hair from her face, she stroked her fingers down her neck and along her collarbone.

Jack held his breath as she timidly cupped one breast. Susan paused; a small, near invisible ripple ran over her skin, a thrill that Jack greedily drank in. Then, parting her lips, she stroked over the smooth, ripe swell of her breast and brushed her nipple with her fingertips.

'Can you still feel my mouth there?' Jack removed his unbuttoned breeches and stood before her. His cock was rigid, standing proud; Susan pinched her nipple, staring at his shaft. 'The way I licked you?'

'Yes.' Susan stroked her other hand down to her remaining nipple, pinching it too. Such a brazen display made Jack all but stop breathing. 'I do.'

'Would you like me to lick you again?'

'Y—yes. Please.'

'Lick you all over your body? Between your legs?'

'I—can you do that?'

'Yes. As many times as you want.' Jack paused. 'And... and you could do the same to me.'

Susan's eyes widened as she gazed at his cock. 'There?'

'Yes.'

'And does it feel like... like it feels when you lick me?'

'Yes.' She was so wise in so many ways, but so unpractised in others. The juxtaposition of such maturity with such innocence, all

wrapped in astonishing bravery, left Jack wanting to fall to his knees. 'I imagine so, at least.'

'Then come to me. Please.'

So polite as well. It made the glimpses of her passionate, wilful side all the more exciting. 'As you wish.'

The last traces of Jack's more reasonable self ebbed away. Walking towards her, covering her with his body, would be decisively breaking away from any attempt at emotional distance. This wasn't just bodily pleasure, even if it was so for Susan—some part of him would remain here, entangled in a web of his own making.

But Susan was waiting for him. Waiting for him to save her in more ways than one. And despite all of his misgivings, his doubts, his fears, Jack knew without a doubt that he was going to give his heart and soul to what was about to happen.

The candle next to the bed was flickering. Susan glanced at it for a moment, shadows dancing over the rough plaster of the cottage walls, until the light guttered down to nothing.

Darkness was better. Much better. Not because she didn't want to look at Jack—looking at him only made her more excited, made her body flower in ways she'd never previously imagined—but because in the dark, in this small, intimate space, she felt free enough to let her soul meet Jack's as their bodies met. She could concentrate on Jack's quiet sigh of pleasure, on the delicious heat of his skin as he came to her, covering her, the mattress creaking in protest beneath his weight.

Jack laughed softly. 'I'm not built for this thing.'

'Where do you normally sleep? On trees sawn in half?'

'Wherever I lay my head, I sleep.' Jack stroked her face; Susan shivered at the feel of his fingers. 'But I'm not going to sleep here and now. Not with you.'

'You haven't slept properly since I arrived. You must be tired.'

'I'm not going to sleep.' Jack's kiss was as firm as it was gentle. 'All right?'

She didn't want him to sleep. Not with his body pressed to hers, his cock between her thighs as if it belonged there. She was being selfish, greedy, foolish—but above all, she wasn't going to stop. Not now she knew that life, such large pieces of it, could be this good.

She kissed Jack, tangling her fingers in his hair. Jack's answering kiss was deep, richer than wine, his growl of pleasure sending a swift, dark thrill down Susan's spine as she whimpered, kissing him again.

She was so wet. Wet between her legs in a way that felt unstoppable; her inner thighs were slick, the shaft of Jack's cock like hard silk against her skin as he deepened his kiss. Susan shifted her hips upwards, urging him onward, then stopped with a cry of pure

frustration as Jack moved his mouth to her neck, his tongue hot against her skin. 'You promised you'd—'

'I didn't promise you anything.' Jack's laughter was rough, delicious. 'Wait a little.'

'Why?'

'Because I want to enjoy you slowly. Feel free to enjoy me too.'

Enjoy him? How was she meant to do that? Do what she wanted, presumably; Susan listened hard to her body, her want, trying to find a thread that could evolve into some sort of action.

She wanted to touch his cock. Wanted to touch him as intimately as he'd touched her in the opium den. Susan reached downward, sliding her hand over Jack's well-muscle chest and stomach until her fingertips brushed against his rigid, swollen member.

'Fuck.' Jack grunted as he thrust his hips forward. 'Like that.'

Everything was dissolving into a delicious blur. Her hands on Jack's cock, learning the shape of him; Jack's mouth on her breasts, grazing his teeth against her nipples as he moaned, kissing his way down her stomach. He parted her thighs, blowing softly against her curls as Susan gripped the blankets, shocked at the pleasure such a simple gesture could give her.

'May I?'

'Yes.' She nodded, wishing she could reach down far enough to kiss him. 'Yes.'

Jack moaned with pleasure as he tasted her, his tongue running along her slit until she wanted to scream. He licked her bud with such focused, passionate ardency, toying with her until Susan had to stop him, pull him back up to kiss her, suddenly afraid that she would reach her peak before she was ready to let this moment go.

She needed more of him. Much more. A delicious interplay of fingers and tongues and soft, sweet moans until Susan shifted her hips upward, mutely begging for him to enter her as a harsh sigh hitched in Jack's throat.

'We can't.' He shifted away, placing his palm over her mound as he kissed her. 'God knows I want to, but we can't.'

'Fine.' It was easier to trust him than to argue. He knew what was best. 'But—but we can't stop.'

'I'm not stopping.' Jack's fingers parted her inner lips, finding her wetness. 'Believe me.'

Please let him never stop. Let this be her new state. Susan curled against him, crying out in new, delighted bliss as Jack stroked her slick flesh, finding her bud.

A long, perfect moment. A touch that never ended, a caress that made her soul sing. Again and again Jack stroked her, kissed her, until his fingers pressed against her bud and held her there.

‘Keep going.’ She didn’t even know why she said it. The panic of suddenly losing such ecstasy made her cling to him, thrusting her hips against his fingers as the feeling grew strong, rough. Uncontrollable.

And then she was there again, that sweet, burning place where only light lived. Pleasure filling her body in shuddering jolts that had her clutching at Jack all the tighter.

‘Better now.’ She murmured the words into Jack’s ear, hardly knowing what she was saying. ‘I... I’m so much better now.’

For a long, wordless stretch of time, the stars shining through the cottage window, Jack tried not to think at all. He lay on the straw-stuffed mattress, Susan’s head on his chest as she silently slept, and tried his best to do nothing but feel.

The deep, physical contentment of his body, resting in each nerve and bone. The softness of Susan’s hair as it trailed across his bare skin. The way the air had thickened, as if the cottage himself was embracing him. Embracing both of them.

He’d thought he understood borrowed time. He’d spent enough nights in gaol, in halfway houses hiding from evil men with dark intentions, to have grown accustomed to the feeling that in the next hour, the next minute, he could slip into the dark. But here, lying with Susan in the safest place he knew, he truly understood the concept for the first time.

Every second here was borrowed. Borrowed from a future that looked more and more miserable every time it appeared in his mind. And the more he tried to enjoy these precious moments, enjoy Susan breathing next to him, the more the gulf of what tomorrow would bring yawned in his mind.

If feeling wouldn’t work, he would have to try dreaming. But as much as he tried to concentrate on abstract images, on sheep to count and grains of wheat, plans inevitably began to form.

He could call in all the favours he had. He had enough of them waiting. He could take the money he’d saved, pay off all of his contacts for the loss of work, and leave London behind. He could find work as a labourer, a publican—anyone who’d have him. And once he was a little more honest, once some of the London muck had scraped off him to show the better man beneath, he could come back here. Come back to this cottage, knock on the door, and...

... and Susan wouldn’t be here. She’d be living her own life in Scotland or Italy, helped by her friends. She’d be free and happy, with the ability to do exactly what she wanted.

She wouldn’t want any memories of the brutal life she’d left behind. Not one. And even if he changed his job, changed his friends—changed his entire life from top to bottom—his face would be an

indelible reminder of what she'd been through.

He would make her unhappy. He'd danced around that truth ever since he'd lain down on that mattress with her in the opium den. Now, on the threshold of something life-altering, Jack knew he couldn't ignore it anymore.

In the morning, when dawn came, he rose from the bed and opened the curtains. He watched the light spill onto the bed, illuminating Susan's sleeping face.

She was the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen. Not just because of her features, but because of her strength. Her ability to seek love, to feel pleasure despite the pain that had characterised so much of her life; that was something beyond mere bravery. After all the horrors of the world, she could still trust people.

She trusted him. And he loved her, loved her so much it hurt to look at her. Loved her enough to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she could do so much better than him.

Working as silently as he could, he dressed himself. He sat at the small, rickety desk in the corner of the room, the chair threatening to break under his weight, and wrote a note to her in his blotched, misshapen handwriting. It wouldn't suffice—nothing would—but it would contain a little, just a little, of the love that he had in him.

Then, when all was finished, he kissed her as gently as he could. Kissed her smooth forehead, her eyelids, her cheeks, her nose. Kissed the corner of her mouth, the part that shivered when he gave her pleasure, and restrained a growl of melancholy.

He had brought her safety. Given her freedom. That had to be enough—he couldn't drag her down into the mire he'd made his home. With a last look at her, setting his mouth into a grim, purposeful line, Jack opened the door of the cottage and walked out.

Darkness. For seven days after he left, Susan felt nothing but darkness. And pain, of course, the pain she had expected—but the darkness drowning her was something of a surprise. As was the sudden spear of shame when she saw her untouched envelope of money sitting on the windowsill.

Jack had put himself in danger for her. He'd helped her escape, given her freedom. And now, despite what they had shared, he was gone.

Unsure of what to do and incapable of doing anything much, she decided to treat herself as if she was suffering from some physical malady. She took to bed after thoroughly washing away any trace of Jack, any stray scent from the sheets and pillows. She stayed there for a week, only rising for necessary things like eating the occasional apple or sitting silently on the doorstep, and slept more than she had

ever slept in her life.

She had always known he would leave, but she would have liked a little more time. Liked it very much. And that time, that undefined span of hours and minutes in which he could have stayed with her, required a period of grieving. When on the seventh day she finally rose, splashing her face with water from the basin and looking out of the window with an unexpected surge of hope, the feeling was twinned intimately with relief.

Her heart was broken. Perhaps it would never heal. Jack had only been in her life for a brief time, and he'd managed to mean more to her than any man she'd ever known. But now, here, she could make her own meaning.

One month later, she still stood by that resolution.

Her life wasn't complicated. She had always loathed complexity when it came to the daily things, to places and activities and objects, mostly because she was frightened of them. This life—this simple life, where she lit her own fire and cooked her own food and worked, worked all day from morning to night in communion with the song of the birds, had almost everything she needed.

Almost. Not Jack—but then, she couldn't think of Jack. Not if she wanted to preserve this peace. She had abundant food from the woman who owned chickens half a mile's walk away, whose sad eyes and pat on the shoulder when she handed Susan a basket of vegetables and eggs spoke of a past similar to hers. She had abundant water from the stream, paper and pencils from the small shop at the entrance of the town, and enough peace and silence to stop feeling afraid.

But she didn't have her friends. Not yet. So when she wrote to all of them, using a false name but including enough information to make it clear exactly who she was, Susan felt a sense of fulfilment so large that it almost shocked her.

They came as quickly as the post went. Three carriages trundling up the small earthen track, horses whinnying in horror at the rural nature of it all, and a flurry of gowns, bright ribbons and laughter that had Susan's heart beating rapidly as she leaned against the threshold of her cottage, her apron still on.

'My darling!'

'Oh, my hero—how did you do it?'

'No-one has the least idea where you are, least of all your father—'

'I've been seeding rumours about you being on the Continent without having the least idea where you actually were—'

'You look so well, Susan! So well!'

At first, once they trooped into the cottage's minuscule parlour, there was nothing that could be done apart from embrace. Susan eagerly pulled all of them to her, breathing them all in; Arabella's



orange-flower scent, Bertha's faint smell of pencils, Grace's smears of oil paint on her fingers as she hugged her tight. Rose stroked her hair, murmuring to her. 'How good to see you.'

'It's good to see you too.'

'And how good to see you here, happy.'

'I am happy.' She'd never said it to another living soul, but in the bosom of her friends' love it was easy. 'I'm very happy indeed.'

When they had finished embracing her, she didn't want to let them go. They were all here, real, together—if she let go of them, they could vanish into the ether. Only with a lot of self-encouragement did Susan manage to disentangle herself, sitting back in her armchair with a quiet sigh as the others clustered at her feet, for all the world as if they were still the young, spirited girls who had sent that letter to the papers rather than the women they had all become.

'To see you here and happy, Susan—it's a dream.' Arabella took her hand, holding it. 'Truly.'

'Truly.' Bertha nodded. 'I couldn't write a happier ending to the story if I sat in my desk for a month.'

'I have your newest book.' Susan pointed to the small table by the window. 'It's wonderful.'

'I could have sent you one myself! Oh, you silly thing—you should have waited until you invited us. I would have brought ten with me.'

'I doubt I need ten.'

'What a lovely house this is.' Grace got up and wandered through to the kitchen; her voice rang through the rooms, clear as a bell. 'What a charming kitchen!'

'Oh, is there a cat? This seems the sort of place to have a cat.' Rose ran to join Grace. 'Where is it?'

'No cat.' Everything was already beyond control; it hadn't taken more than a few moments. Susan sat down in her armchair with a burst of exhausted laughter. 'Although who knows—you might have brought one in.'

'Hmm.' Arabella leaned down, putting her hand on Susan's wrist. 'And I see we've already tired you out.'

'Not at all.'

'You can't lie to me, dear.'

'I'm not lying to you. I've simply grown unused to speaking to people.'

'We can stay in silence if you want.'

'No—I like your chatter.'

'You've never been the most loquacious of us, dear.' Arabella smiled. 'We don't expect you to be the soul of the conversation.'

'Exactly.' Bertha leaned forward. 'All we want to do is admire the new glow in your cheeks and the thickness of your wrists. You've been

eating.'

'I've been feasting. Lots of milk and potatoes—you'd think I was a calf that had been rejected by its mother. Of course, that's not such a distant comparison.'

'My goodness.' Bertha held a hand to her mouth with a scandalised giggle. 'At least you can laugh about it, I suppose.'

'I've learned to laugh at it. I've learned to laugh at lots of things. Here in the quiet, in the peace, laughter doesn't seem quite as unnatural as it did at home.' Susan swallowed. 'And—and how is home?'

'Do you really wish to know?'

'No details. But then, I don't think any of you know the details.'

'We don't.' Arabella paused delicately. 'Everyone is still living, as far as we know.'

'Good.' It was the expected answer, but no feeling came to Susan as she said the words. Her mother and father were so distant from her now; she had cut herself adrift from them, disappeared like a magic trick. With the money Jack had left her, the money he was supposed to have, she could live in this simple way for many years without having to seek work. 'And that's all I need to know.'

After that small mountain was climbed, the conversation flowed with far more ease. Susan found herself more than content to take her usual role, watching her friends shine in a silence that meant pure contentment. Old jokes, new books, funny things Arabella's child had said, new things Bertha's baby could do day by day; all of it was rich, nourishing food, better for her than any meal she'd ever had, and she lapped it up with a greed that told her in no uncertain terms just how lonely she'd been without these women by her side.

Now she could truly take her place in the group, be a part of their friendship with no secrets. She didn't need to hide her father's excesses anymore; he had been removed from her life forever. She was safe, ready to move on when she chose to.

Jack had made her safe. As if her friends had heard her thought, they sunk into an unusual moment of complete silence.

Eventually, Grace leaned forward. 'May I ask something indelicate?'

'It depends on how indelicate it is.'

'How exactly did you manage to hide yourself away here without any help from anyone? No friends, no relatives. If you don't want to tell us, you can—'

'No, no. I can say it. There—there was a person who aided me. A person I hired.'

'My goodness. Who?'

'I... I think if I speak too much about him, I'll imperil his work.'

‘Ah.’ Grace paused for a long moment. ‘A him, then.’

The silence in the room deepened. Susan could feel the shy curiosity building among her friends, but no convenient words came to make the conversation flow again.

‘He’s a very good man.’ If she didn’t speak, they’d start imagining things. Not that their imaginings would be so different from the truth. ‘We only met for a brief time, very brief, but his goodness was palpable.’

Arabella nodded cautiously. ‘I’m sure it was.’

‘I... I would have very much liked to know him better.’ Not a full confession, but enough to lift just a little of the heaviness that had covered her soul. ‘But there wasn’t enough time.’

‘I see.’ Bertha nodded. Then, as if Susan had said something entirely different, she embraced her tightly. Soon Arabella joined in, then Rose, then Grace; Susan laughed, the armchair completely surrounded, the love of her friends so potent she could practically feel it on her skin.

Then she began to weep. Weep loudly, as if something had broken inside her. The Unmarriageables drew closer, holding her tight: holding as if they’d never let go.

By the time they all finally left, the sky was darkening. Susan waved from the doorstep as the carriage rattled down the old dirt road, blackberry vines scratching the sides of the vehicle and leaving small but definite scars in the shiny black surface. When it had disappeared from view, swallowed up in abundant nature, she stepped back inside her house with a sigh.

She hadn’t wanted them to leave, and they hadn’t wanted to leave either, but time waited for no-one. Her friends had children to go home to, husbands who would be curious to know how their quiet, strange friend was doing, while she had the house to settle for bed—the fire swept, the windows shuttered—and her peace, fragile as it was, to preserve.

Now that the eerie silence of the cottage had been broken by her friends, by their joy, it would be easier to let them return. They would visit more, have picnics on the grass and walk down to the brook to bathe their feet—they could even bring their children. And she would put more flowers in vases throughout the cottage, fill the place with blooms, and perhaps wear brighter gowns than her old grey one that was growing not fit to be seen in...

... and maybe, maybe, she would write a letter to Jack. Not a long one, not full of breathless sentiments too complicated to write about without using reams of paper. But a letter stating, in no uncertain terms, just how she felt about him—and how she hoped he felt about

her.

And then, just perhaps, he would visit. Perhaps not. But still... perhaps.

A brief crunch of glass captured her attention. She must have left a glass on the table in the kitchen; it had been blown over by the wind, or dropped to the floor. Or perhaps a tabby cat really had wandered in, some village cat who knew what a soft touch she was, and was eagerly knocking over glasses in the vain hope of being fed a night-time meal.

She walked into the kitchen, looking around for the glass. As she caught sight of the broken window, the jagged glass forming the pattern of a misshapen star, followed by a glimpse of the wide open door, something hard slammed against her scalp.

Pain bloomed in her head, her knees buckling. As she crumpled to the floor, the furniture in the kitchen waving in her blurred vision, Susan reflexively curled into the smallest ball possible.

‘How.’ She murmured the word almost to herself. ‘How did you—’

‘I followed your friends.’ Her father sounded obscenely smug. He stood over her, silhouetted in the starlight; Susan couldn’t see his features and realised she was grateful for that. ‘They made such a spectacle about leaving. No-one thought I’d be this clever—not even you.’ His boot crunched down on her hand; Susan restrained a wail of pain. ‘Did you?’

He was going to kill her. He had to be. Or else he was going to do worse; drag her back to London, to the townhouse she had almost managed to forget, and keep her there until she was too weak to try and leave again.

But that couldn’t happen. It wouldn’t happen. Because somewhere in the city, in the dark heart of London, was a man who cared enough about her to make sure she was alive, well. Happy.

*Jack.* She threw her whole being into the thought. She imagined him, remembering every detail she could. *Jack, save me.*

‘You shouldn’t have come here.’ It was difficult to speak calmly; it would only invite her father’s blows. ‘It’ll be the worse for you.’

‘What?’ His father’s boot stamped down onto her hand with even more force. ‘Have you taken leave of your senses?’

‘No. Well—maybe. But still.’ In the darkness, Susan managed to smile. ‘Someone’s coming.’

‘Who?’

‘Someone who’s going to hurt you very badly.’ It felt good to shock her father, even if she was huddled on the kitchen floor with her head and hand in agony. ‘The question is whether you have the courage to kill me before he arrives.’

The night was cold, but the horse rode fast enough to shake away all promise of a chill. As the thick fog of London gave way to the mist of the countryside, the paved roads becoming narrower and surrounded by fields as Jack rode, gripping the reins tight.

He didn't know why he was doing it. Why he was returning to the place he'd sworn to avoid forever. Not to declare himself to Susan: such a thing would require sunlight, flowers, and this was an ugly night.

He'd never set much store by premonitions. Most of the people who claimed such powers were charlatans—at least, the ones that he'd met—and their stories were always too pat. There would always be ladies and gentlemen willing to part with their money for a comforting story, for the idea that they could control the uncontrollable. But as he'd sat there in a disgusting pub, straw on the floor to catch the vomit and stray dogs in corners fighting over scraps of grey meat, an uncanny flash of knowledge had startled him.

Susan was in danger. How, he didn't know, but she was. And he needed to stop making himself miserable, go back to that cottage, and do what she'd damn well paid him to do.

It was a quick journey. A horse tended to ride very fast indeed with a man like him breathing down their neck. As soon as he arrived at the cottage and saw the candlelight burning in the broken cottage window, saw the dark figure staring down at Susan with a stick in his hand, a mixture of fear and anger almost stopped Jack's heart.

He'd left her to this fate. He'd trusted his judgement, his reason, when he should have simply held her to him and never, ever let her go. And now the bastard had found her, and—and if he didn't act now, right now, he was going to lose the only woman he'd ever truly loved.

Because he loved her. More than anything. And as soon as that feeling had settled in his core, shining there, everything had become very easy indeed.

The locks he'd put on the cottage door were nothing against the force of his blows. The door crumpled like paper; he stepped into the cottage and walked into the parlour, clenching his aching fists. Just as he stepped over the threshold of the room, he heard Susan's voice.

'I told you.' Her tone rang with quiet triumph. Her face was bleeding, as were her hands; how long had she been here on this cold, hard floor, subject to her father's tortures? 'I told you he'd come.'

She'd trusted him. She'd kept trusting him even when she had no more reason to do so. Before Jack's heart could break in two with love and guilt, he ran into the room.

He took hold of Susan's father by the scruff of the neck. Mr. Blake went crashing to the flagstones, a reek of alcohol coming off of him as

he cried out in surprise. Jack bent over him, curling his lip at his veined nose, his yellowed eyes.

With one swift punch to Mr. Blake's wrist, the stick was released. It clattered onto the flagstones. Jack punched the man's wrist once more for good measure, trying not to feel too satisfied when he heard bones crunch. 'Mr. Blake. We haven't been introduced.'

'Unhand me, you—'

'I'm Jack Witt. I'm the man that's going to kill you.'

The bloodlust had been rising in him ever since Susan had first told him her story. Building like a great black tide inside him, drowning out almost every finer feeling. With a growl of animal satisfaction, pushing up the sleeves of his greatcoat, Jack hit the man as hard as he possibly could.

He'd never had so much fury to indulge. So much swift, righteous anger that could be released in a flurry of blows, of kicks, of growls that he only dimly realised were coming from his own throat as Mr. Blake wailed and cried beneath him. Violence, pure, unfettered violence that kicked and clawed and rejoiced, rejoiced at being able to avenge the woman he loved, until Susan's broken cry filtered through the red mist that had descended. 'Stop!'

Stop? Why should he stop? This was necessary, more than necessary—this man had hurt Susan. Jack shook off the cry like a dog shaking off water, preparing to hit him again.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the broken window. Reflected in the starlight, his fist raised, he stopped.

He looked like no-one at all. A nameless, violent thug. Far, far too similar to the man beneath him, the man who had made Susan's life a living hell.

'I'm sorry.' He held up his hands, finding Susan's gaze. If he lost her trust now, his life wouldn't be worth living. 'I'm sorry, I—'

'You stopped.' Susan paused. She sounded as if she didn't quite believe it, as if she'd never seen a man restrain himself before. 'You stopped. It's all right.'

'I won't touch him again. I won't lay a finger on him.'

'Thank you.' A long, reflective pause. 'Although—although you could remove him from the house. If you wish.'

Jack wished to pound the man's head into the flagstones until he was nothing but pulp in a waistcoat, but his wishes couldn't take precedence over Susan's. Before he could waste any more time, he roughly heaved Mr. Blake into his arms.

Thank God the man was still breathing. Laboured breathing, but he'd take it. He walked to the door, kicked it fully open, and threw Mr. Blake with his last ounce of strength onto the grass.

Let him lie there. Let him rot. What mattered was Susan; Susan

crouched on the floor, her hair dishevelled, her hands bloodied.

Never again. He would never raise his fists in anger again. Jack went to her, almost slipping on the floor in his haste.

Witt.' A drop of blood hung on Susan's lips as she smiled. Jack's heart turned over in his chest as he knelt, taking her gently in his arms. 'I finally know your surname.'

'Don't talk. Not if it pains you.'

'I called you. Did you know that? I called for you in the dark, in my head, and—and you came.'

'Let's not start believing in magic.' Christ, her hand. Jack fought the urge to go outside and finish the job he'd started. 'I'm here. It's all that matters.'

'Magic matters.'

'You matter. You matter more than anything else in the world to me.' He stroked her head, her face, searching for broken bones and thankfully finding none. The man had left her intact—but oh, God, it had been too close. Far too close. 'All right?'

'I love you, Jack Witt. Jack formerly without a surname.'

'And I love you too.' How could he ever have thought that he could keep himself from her? This was where he was meant to be: at her side, tending her wounds, making her well. Healing her and healing himself at the same time. 'More than anything.'

The cottage was so quiet. The only sound was Mr. Blake's laboured breathing. When the tension had finally left Jack's body, when Susan's breathing had slowed, he gathered into his arms as if she were made of glass.

'I'm taking you to a doctor I know. A good one.' He kissed Susan's forehead so gently that he barely felt her skin beneath his lips. 'He works all hours of the day and night.'

'Removing bullets from men who don't wish to give their names to doctors.'

'Of course. But he'll take anyone who comes, and everyone who pays. I'm going to get you bandaged up, with enough laudanum in you to take away even the memory of pain, and then you're going to sleep in the carriage while I take your father back to his house. I haven't decided if I'm going to drag him from the back of my horse or kick him down the road until my foot's tired, but I'm sure inspiration will arrive.'

'You're very eloquent when you're angry.'

'Do you like it?'

'Yes.'

'And then, when that's taken care of, I'm bringing you back here. And if you want me to, I'll stay forever.'

Susan leant her head against his chest. When she finally spoke, the

hope in her voice made Jack shiver. ‘Truly?’

‘Until I’m dead and buried.’

‘Yes.’

‘I love you. I love you so much.’

‘Stay with me.’ Susan winced as she placed her bruised, bleeding palm against his. ‘Never let me go.’

So this was what perfect happiness was. Sitting in darkness, still breathless from a fight, holding the woman he loved as she lay in his arms. Broken, bleeding, both of them—but he had found her, she had found him, and they would never be torn apart no matter what occurred.

‘Sleep now.’ He stood, holding her tenderly in his arms. ‘It’ll be dawn soon enough.’

## THE END

### KEEP EXPLORING

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